The New Criterion

April 1994

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The New Criterion *April 1994*

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Rachel Hadas's book of translations, *Other Worlds Than This*, is forthcoming from Rutgers University Press.

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Notes & Comments: April 1994

Exit comparative literature, enter "cultural productions"

According to a State of the Discipline report issued recently by the American Comparative Literature Association, it has now been decided by this august body of (former?) literary scholars that "'literature' may no longer adequately describe our object of study." A committee of ten disaffected comparatists, chaired by Charles Bernheimer, professor of what is still called "comparative literature" at the University of Pennsylvania, has decided to dump what is described as the "restrictive Eurocentrism" that formerly determined the boundaries of this field of study in favor of—well, the usual politicization of practically everything. Or, to quote directly from the ACLA report:

> The notion that the promulgation of standards could serve to define a discipline has collapsed in the face of an increasingly apparent porosity of one discipline's practices to another's. . . . The space of comparison today involves comparisons between artistic productions usually studied by different disciplines; between various cultural constructions of those disciplines; between Western cultural traditions, both high and popular, and those of non-Western cultures; between the pre- and post-contact cultural productions of colonized peoples; between gender constructions defined as feminine and those defined as masculine, or between sexual orientations defined as straight and those defined as gay; between racial and ethnic modes of signifying; between hermeneutic articulations of meaning and materialist analyses of its modes of production and circulation; and much more. These ways of contextualizing literature in the expanding fields of discourse, culture, ideology, race, and gender are so different from the old models of literary study according to authors, nations, periods, and genres that the term "literature" may no longer adequately describe our object of study.

"Literature," according to this report, is now a word best used between quotation marks, and what it once described is now to be referred to as "literary phenomena" or "high literary discourse," as in the following sentence from the ACLA report: "This suggests, among other fundamental adjustments, that Comparative Literature departments would moderate their focus on high literary discourse and examine the entire discursive context in which texts are created and such heights are constructed." What "the entire discursive context" means, of course, is equal time—and maybe something better than equal time—to non-literary texts, or should we say non-literary productions, for they need not be texts (as we used to think of that term) or even writing. Indeed, they may be non-literate. The report helpfully points out that "anthropological and ethnographic models for the comparative study of cultures

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may be found as suitable for certain courses of study as models derived from literary criticism and theory." Which is to say, *more* suitable, since what was once called literature is now demoted to the status of ethnographic production.

And what are the members of the ACLA invited to busy themselves with now that literature, comparative or otherwise, has been consigned to oblivion? "Comparative Literature departments," the report recommends, "should play an active role in furthering the multicultural recontextualization of Anglo-American and European perspectives." As if that project in the deconstruction of the of the Western literary tradition were not enough, what were once called comparative literature departments are also urged to "include comparisons between media, from early manuscripts to TV, Hypertext, and Virtual Realities."

This brings the writers of the ACLA report to the subject of—er, books. You know, what writers write and readers read. The report urges, in effect, that we no longer afford them what is inevitably called a "privileged" status.

> The material form that has constituted our object of study for centuries, the book, is in the process of being transformed through computer technology and the communications revolution.

Thus what is recommended for study—rather than literature, that is—is "the business of book-making [and] also the cultural place and function of reading and writing and the physical properties of newer communicative media." The new breed of post-comparatists are also warned against teaching undergraduate students "just Great Books," and urged to offer instruction in "how a book comes to be designated as 'great' in a particular culture, that is, what interests have been and are invested in maintaining this label." As dressing for this salad, teachers of college undergraduates are also urged to offer the now standard mixture of "Eurocentrism, canon formation, essentialism, colonialism, and gender studies."

What this report on the State of the Discipline in Comparative Literature amounts to, then, is an obituary for one of the most exalted traditions of literary and humanistic study in the American university. We are told that the discussion of the report by ACLA members was "passionate" and "many-sided," and that the report should not be taken to represent any sort of "consensus." Yet the fact is that the report has been issued, and the opposition to it—supposing it to exist—has, as of this writing, remained inaudible. And the report itself already makes clear that what is "recommended" in this report has already been put into practice throughout comparative literature departments the country over. Once again, literature has been assassinated, and radical politics has emerged victorious.

Philosophy made him do it

The thought that everything was put on this earth with a purpose is consoling, not least because it helps to explain such phenomena as George Steiner. You might have thought that Professor Steiner, best known as the author of the perfectly named *After Babel* and a frequent contributor to the book pages of *The New Yorker*, was merely a pretentious windbag specializing in moral obfuscation. We confess that we had been accustomed to think this ourselves. Over the course of his long and wordy career, Professor Steiner has managed to blur more issues than almost anyone else we can think of. He has, for example, written a novel that comes close to justifying the activities of Adolf Hitler and articles defending the social vision of Lenin against the indictment penned by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in *The Gulag Archipelago*.

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Professor Steiner specializes in the Big Picture. If the art historian Anthony Blunt is uncovered as a Soviet agent, Professor Steiner swings into action with a forty-page article in *The New Yorker* to explain that, terrible as it is to be a traitor, it just may be the fault of capitalist society. Blunt, you see, couldn't stand the thought that in the West some great works of art were in private hands and so were inaccessible. Professor Steiner explains: "In the Soviet Union, he knew, great art hangs in public galleries. No scholars, no men and women wanting to mend their soul before a Raphael or Matisse need wait, cap in hand, at the mansion door." The bit about soul mending is a signature Steiner touch. His basic recipe is to find something nice to say about Marxism, kick capitalism, and, to show that he is a fellow with Depth, end by talking about God, transcendence, or the soul-mending powers of art.

One theme that has much occupied Professor Steiner is the Fate of the Intellectual in Modern Society—i.e., what is to become of people like George Steiner? Professor Steiner's latest contribution to this question is a review of the memoirs of the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser. Although he inhabits the dust bin of history today, it was not so long ago that Althusser was a big deal in French intellectual life. His combination of structuralist rhetoric and Leninist slogans made him catnip for a generation of students searching for new ways to be more obscure and more Left than thou. But Althusser had a small problem. In November 1980, he went off his head and strangled his wife. That, anyway, is how the French authorities saw it. It's much more complicated for the sage Steiner. Here is the relevant passage from his review, published in *The New Yorker* for February 21:

> There are moments when bad taste is the last refuge of common sense. Let me be in bad taste. Perhaps philosophers *should* strangle their wives. The name of Socrates' wife has passed into the language as that of an ignorant shrew. Philosophy is an unworldly, abstruse, often egomaniacal obsession. The body is an enemy to absolute logic or metaphysical speculation. The thinker inhabits fictions of purity, of reasoned propositions as sharp as white light. Marriage is about roughage, bills, garbage disposal, and noise. There is something vulgar, almost absurd, in the notion of a Mrs. Plato or a Mme. Descartes, or of Wittgenstein on a honeymoon. Perhaps Louis Althusser was enacting a necessary axiom or logical proof when, on the morning of November 16, 1980, he throttled his wife.

Or perhaps not. Perhaps he was simply insane. We are of course sorry that marriage for Professor Steiner is "about roughage, bills, garbage disposal, and noise"; too bad, that. But we are grateful for his reflections on the philosophical life—not to mention his illustration of what he thinks counts as "common sense." We had thought that George Steiner was merely a pretentious fool. We were wrong. He, too, is here for a reason: to be a cautionary tale, a warning to others about the dangers of moral fatuousness. It is difficult work, but Professor Steiner has thrown himself into it with abandon.

"Zeitgeist of the week"

From time to time there emerges from the windy rhetoric and unanchored hyperbole of the fast-track media world a turn of phrase which unintentionally encapsulates everything that is most fatuous about the culture of contemporary journalism. Words which once carried weighty implications are drafted to serve as expedient slogans for the most commonplace professional practices. As a result, the words are emptied of meaning while their speakers are inadvertently self-identified as casualties of their own pretension.

A noteworthy contribution to this lexicon of media fatuousness was recently given to us

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when, upon his appointment to the editorship of *New York* magazine, Kurt Andersen, lately of *Spy* and *Time*, disclosed in an interview in *The New York Times* that certain sections of *New York* would henceforth be "much more driven by events and the Zeitgeist of the week." Reading this, we almost had to be grateful that the long saga of a search for a new editor of *New York* had culminated on such a delightfully comic note.

The *Zeitgeist of the week!* What term could better serve as a symbol for everything that is most trivializing about slick-paper journalism in the 1990s? What Mr. Andersen apparently has in mind for *New York* are what used to be known as timely topics. The word "Zeitgeist," on the other hand, was reserved for something larger and deeper than the news of the day, or even the news of the week. For it was correctly assumed that it was not in the nature of "the spirit of the time" to manifest itself for the convenience of a weekly deadline. For manifestations of that kind, the word "fashion" was once considered adequate.

It is of course amusing to think of what a weekly dispatch by some latter-day Spengler would consist of, but we somehow doubt that Mr. Andersen will be able to deliver on this bizarre promise. What the "Zeitgeist of the week" is likely to be in practice, we predict, is the usual combination of recycled news and chatter about cultural fashion. In other words, what the fast-track media world is already bringing to us in superabundant quantities. Meanwhile, however, the word "Zeitgeist" will now have to be retired—except, of course, for comic effect.

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Who was Dwight Macdonald?

by Hilton Kramer

There is a passage in Hazlitt's *The Spirit of the Age*—it comes in the essay on "The Late Mr. Horne Tooke"—that defines not only its eponymous subject but an entire class of failed writers. "He generally ranged himself on the losing side," wrote Hazlitt, "and had rather an ill-natured delight in contradiction, and in perplexing the understandings of others, without leaving them any clue to guide them out of the labyrinth into which he had led them. He understood, in its perfection, the great art of throwing the *onus probandi* on his adversaries, and so could maintain almost any opinion, however absurd or fantastical, with fearless impunity."

Writers of this class are remembered for their follies, rather than their wisdom, for their follies have a representative character. What they illuminate is not the distilled intelligence of their time but its shibboleths and chimeras. These they have the talent to make so entertaining that their writings seem for a while audacious and even original. It is only later, in the sober light of retrospection, that we come to understand that the "ill-natured delight in contradiction" in such writers had only succeeded in trivializing every important subject they touched upon. In the end this ability to "maintain almost any opinion, however absurd or fantastical," turns out to have been an act, a performance, a role that never required the writers themselves to live by any of the ideas they so easily espoused. There was always a new role to play, or an old one to be revived, or a holiday to be taken when no suitable parts presented themselves.

It has long seemed to me that the American writer Dwight Macdonald (1906–1982) was a figure of this kind. "All he wanted was *negative success*," Hazlitt said of Horne Tooke, and then added: "to this no one was better qualified to aspire. Cross purposes, *moot-points*, pleas, demurrers, flaws in the indictment, double meanings, cases, inconsequentialities, these were the playthings, the darlings of Mr. Tooke's mind." The same could be said of Macdonald's. In that coterie of New York intellectuals that first made its presence felt in the pages of *Partisan Review* in the late 1930s and early 1940s—the circle in which Macdonald achieved his initial reputation as a writer—delight in contradiction was elevated to a vocation, and Macdonald was its most amusing practitioner. Yet in politics he always remained something of a fantasist and a light-weight, an amateur passionately in love with extreme positions and unworldly strategems. "For him," wrote William Barrett in *The Truants*, "every venture into politics was a leap toward the Absolute." Hence his addiction to "almost any opinion, however absurd or fantastical," so long as it remained safely distant from any possibility of compromise or realization.

That he commanded a gift for intellectual entertainment is undeniable, and it was all the more appreciated because it was a gift rarely found in the leaden world of radical debate. His high-spirited prose was often

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fun to read. If not for his radicalism, he might have become the Mencken of his generation. Yet in Macdonald's case, the amusement his writings offered tended to be in inverse proportion to the seriousness of his subjects. About figures easily ridiculed, whether in politics, literature, journalism, or popular culture, he could be devastating as well as hilarious. This is an example from his little book *Henry Wallace: The Man and the Myth* (Vanguard Press, 1948), published the year that Wallace, who had been Vice President in the the third Roosevelt administration, broke with the Democratic Party to run for the presidency as the candidate of the Progressive Party, a Stalinist creation:

> Wallaceland is the mental habitat of Henry Wallace plus a few hundred thousand regular readers of *The New Republic*, *The Nation*, and *PM*. It is a region of perpetual fogs, caused by the warm winds of the liberal Gulf Stream coming in contact with the Soviet glacier. Its natives speak "Wallese," a debased provincial dialect.

When he traded his jester's cap and bells for the costume of a thinker, however, he always ran the risk of turning himself into a target of satire. This was particularly true when he took to rehearsing some untenable political posture. At such times, real issues and momentous events were recast as episodes in a private drama of choices so absolute that they no longer bore much relation to the realities which had prompted them. In the realm of politics, Macdonald's position was often that of a writer in a kind of free fall where the gravity of history was suspended in favor of sheer weightlessness.

Here, by way of examples, is a sampling of Macdonald's characteristic political utterences between 1941, when he was quarreling with his colleagues at *Partisan Review* over America's role in the Second World War, and 1953, when he finally conceded that he had lost interest in the whole radical enterprise:

> July-August 1941:
> In the war or out of it, the United States faces only one future under capitalism: fascism.
>
> July 1944:
> No, whatever leadership towards social progress may exist in the world, it is not to be found in this country.
>
> March 1946:
> It may be there is no exit from the blind alley, but surely the first condition for finding one is to give up the superficial lesser-evil approach, with the support it implies for a future war against Russia, in favor of a more radical and basic approach, be it pacifist or social-revolutionary or perhaps some new combination of both.
>
> Spring 1948:
> Let us admit at once—let us, indeed, insist on the point—that all the criticisms made of U.S.S.R. could also be made of U.S.A.
>
> Winter 1952:
> During the last war, I did not choose, at first because I was a revolutionary socialist of Trotskyist coloration, later because I was becoming, especially after the atom bomb, a pacifist. Neither of these positions now appear valid to me.
>
> 1953:
> Perhaps there is no solution to these agonizing problems. . . . This is one reason I am less interested in politics than I used to be.

That Macdonald was *ever* taken seriously as a political thinker is less a reflection of any sagacity he commanded on the subject of politics than a measure of the intellectual desperation that afflicted the non-Stalinist radical Left once the myth of a socialist millennium had collapsed and radicals had to make do with purely rhetorical substitutes—a commodity that Macdonald was certainly well equipped to supply.

This view of Macdonald is, of course, very much at odds with his reputation as a radical, a Marxist, a Trotskyist, an anarchist, a

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pacifist, a champion of revolution, a partisan of the Sixties New Left, and the rest of the folderol about his career as a "revolutionist." With Macdonald, I believe, we must distinguish between the roles he assumed—there were quite a few of them, after all—and the fundamental loyalties that governed his life, his style, and his moral temper. In my view, anyway, he was always at heart a bourgeois literary aesthete—a bit of a snob, too, as aesthetes tend to be, a patrician rebel, and a cultural elitist—who was able to sustain an interest in politics, *any* politics, only when its choices presented themselves to his mind as high drama for the happy few. His spiritual affinities, if we may call them that, were closer to those of the literary culture of the 1890s and the 1920s than to the political culture of the 1930s and 1940s, though it was the latter, of course, that provided him with the roles that won him his reputation as a radical. Macdonald was thus an example of a cultural phenomenon too rarely studied: the aesthete who carries into politics a disdain for compromise and even common sense that is more appropriate to the rarified air of Parnassus than to the contingent conflicts of the social arena.

It is worth remembering in this connection that the aesthete's mind is also one that is enamored of absolutes, and in the absence of absolutes—the most dreaded of all conditions for the aesthete and the radical alike—the ordinary vicissitudes of art or politics or life itself lose their savor. Boredom looms as the only alternative, and some variety of intellectual ennui is the punishment that follows in its wake. This was the condition that overtook Macdonald in that long furlough from radical polemics that separated the first phase of his political engagement in the Thirties and Forties from his second and final plunge into the politics of revolution in the Sixties and Seventies. It was a furlough spent mostly at *The New Yorker*, which he had once denounced in *Partisan Review* as the "accurate expression of a decaying social order," but where his own bourgeois snobberies were now easily accommodated, and where, ironically enough, the politics of revolution acquired a kind of chic at the very moment when the aging Macdonald was abandoning the magazine to ascend the rhetorical barricades for the last time.

Macdonald himself has left us a poignant clue to his sensibility in a dispirited memoir called "Politics Past," which he published in *Encounter* in 1957 during his long furlough from the radical ranks. This was intended to be his swan song to politics, and would have been if he had not been lured out of political retirement by the events of the Sixties. Looking back on the 1930s from the perspective of the Cold War of the 1950s, he wrote in defense of his own failed efforts as a political writer that "an interest in *avant-garde* politics was expected of every proper intellectual. Those few who were 'unpolitical' were *déclassé*, accused of Escapism, Living in an Ivory Tower, etc. Even so unpolitical a type as Edmund Wilson signed *Culture and the Crisis*, a celebrated pamphlet-manifesto, in support of the Communist candidates in the presidential election."

The most telling word in this passage is, I think, "*avant-garde*," which in this context nicely conflates the impulses of radical politics with those of modernist art and literature. But the whole passage mixes up the language of the literary avant-garde with that of the radical movement in a way that suggests a closer acquaintance with *Axel's Castle* than with *Das Kapital*. (The notion that Edmund Wilson was somehow "unpolitical" before 1932 isn't accurate, either.) And the entire memoir acquires added resonance when we learn from Michael Wreszin's new biography of Macdonald about his student days as an aesthete at Exeter in the 1920s.[1] Mr. Wreszin writes:

> Dwight became part of a circle of bookish young men who saw themselves as set apart from the majority of the students. . . . Within that group, Dwight, Justin O'Brien, and Dins-

1 *A Rebel in Defense of Tradition: The Life and "Politics" of Dwight Macdonald*, by Michael Wreszin; Basic Books, 590 pages, $30.

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more Wheeler founded their own inner circle, the Hedonists. Mencken, Baudelaire, George Jean Nathan, and Oscar Wilde were their patron saints. Their motto: "*Pour épater les bourgeois*." Their notepaper bore the slogan "Cynicism, Estheticism, Criticism, Pessimism." They sported monocles and batik ties and carried canes on their walks in the surrounding countryside. They were, Dwight later admitted, "frightful snobs."

From the aestheticism of the 1920s, with its motto, "*Pour épater les bourgeois*," which pretty much remained Macdonald's intellectual banner during his undergraduate years at Yale, to the "*avant-garde* politics" of the Thirties was not, for a man in his privileged position, that big a leap. It was *épater les bourgeois* all the way, while for a good deal of the time there was no need to forgo bourgeois comforts or a steady income. The problem for a radical/aesthete like Macdonald, however, was to decide exactly which of the many varieties of "*avant-garde* politics" on offer in the Thirties—and later on, too, for that matter—was sufficiently pleasing to his taste to command his allegiance.

The new biography by Michael Wreszin, a historian who teaches at Queens College and the City University of New York, makes fascinating reading in this regard. For it happened that Macdonald, once he discovered the pleasures of the Left's capacious ideological smorgasbord, managed to sample just about every dish that was served up, defending each in turn with absolute conviction and tolerating no alternatives or modifications. Professor Wreszin gets the matter exactly right when he says of Macdonald that "expediency, pragmatic compromise irritated him. He was attracted not so much to abstract ideological frameworks as to commitment, enthusiasm, dedication to one's beliefs."

But what *were* Macdonald's beliefs? He had so many in the course of his career, and they were so frequently subject to sudden shifts. In less than a decade he moved from a commitment to the Communist Party, which he discovered while researching an article for *Fortune*, where he was making a five-figure salary during the Depression, to the embrace of Trotskyist anti-Stalinism before settling for a vaguely defined mixture of anarchism and pacifism during the Second World War. It was wholly in character, moreover, that during his Communist phase he was fellow-traveler rather than a party member, that during his Trotskyist period he quarreled with Trotsky, and that during his anti-war anarchist-pacifist period he adamantly refused to acknowledge that there was something more at stake in the war than a defense of American capitalist imperialism.

For Macdonald, it was always enough to be against the government, opposed to American society, and scornful of capitalism. That was what made radical politics fun for him, and when it stopped being fun, he turned his talents to debunking American middlebrow culture, an endeavor that satisfied both his intellectual elitism and his distaste for his own class, the American bourgeoisie. As a critic, however, he was careful to steer clear of great writers. He seemed instinctively to understand that they were beyond his range. Popular culture, on the other hand, offered rich opportunities for sarcasm and condescension. Attacking it was almost as much fun as attacking Henry Wallace or Harry Truman.

It was not as if Macdonald had ever acquired any special affection for the toiling masses or their ill-bred champions in the labor movement even in his most radical period in the Thirties. He was still too much of a snob for that. Professor Wreszin tells an interesting story in this regard about the summer of 1934. Macdonald was then employed at *Fortune*, and would soon marry Nancy Rodman, a wealthy debutante turned radical who was already further to the Left than Macdonald himself. It was on her trust fund that they lived when he quit *Fortune* to devote full time to radical journalism.

On a hot Saturday in July, Dwight, the photographer Walker Evans, and Geoffrey

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Hellman, who was a staff writer for the *New Yorker*, drove up to Westchester County to visit Nitgedaiget "(Yiddish for 'not to worry')," a Communist Party training and recreation center. Dwight reported to Nancy, still vacationing in Dublin, New Hampshire, that visiting the camp almost "made a fascist" out of him. He had discovered in himself an aristocratic revulsion—"as to bathing in a slightly dirty pool with the other comrades and eating off slightly soiled plates with the other comrades and applauding mass-level violin solos with the other comrades"—that surprised him. He added by way of justification that he had a "fundamental dislike for living as one of the herd. The comrades were 99 44/100% pure Yiddish and they had that peculiar Yiddish love of living in each other's laps that you can observe any day at Coney Island." Dwight must have been slightly defensive about these class and ethnic slurs, for he quickly added that he felt "disgusted by humanity, whether Yiddish or Racquet Clubbish, when it presented itself as a squirming mass." In any event, he and his cohorts could not stand the camp beyond Sunday noon, brunch time, so they beat a hasty retreat to the Westchester Embassy Club, where Geoffrey Hellman was a member, and they "bathed in a clean capitalist pool and drank a couple of Tom Collinses in capitalistic solitude."

Nancy, however, was ready to place Dwight's experience in a proper—which is to say, a politically correct—context. Professor Wreszin continues:

> Nancy did not seem to take offense at this glib, Waspish mockery, responding that she could well understand how he "might have turned Fascist" by attending the camp. "My stomach is often turned at continual radical meetings and dirty radicals and self-interested radicals." But she was quick to add, "Still I believe in communism as the only way out of the political disruption that is going on nowadays." Nancy had just read Ella Winter's *Red Virtue: Human Relationships in the New Russia*, which she thought very good. Winter's Russia sounded pretty idyllic despite the hardships. "There at least everyone has some definite goal. An attempt is made to let everyone do work for which they are fitted and to adjust those that are not fitted. And stupid conventions are forgotten and everyone has a personal freedom that we never dreamed of."

Mercifully, the Macdonalds were soon disabused of this version of red virtue, rescued by the predominantly Jewish intellectuals who were attempting to publish *Partisan Review*, which had been founded as an organ of the Communist Party, as an anti-Stalinist, pro-Trotsky, Marxist literary journal. "Dwight, with his enthusiasm for debate, was charmed by the aggressiveness of his new associates and impressed with their learning and serious literary interests," Professor Wreszin writes. Macdonald even found a patron for the new magazine in George L. K. Morris, the painter who had been his classmate at Yale and with whom he had briefly published a literary journal called the *Miscellany*. Nancy Macdonald served as *Partisan*'s business manager. Yet, when the war erupted and real political choices had to be made, Macdonald found these "new associates" insufficiently radical, and so he broke with them to start his own journal, *Politics*. Macdonald was never one to allow political reality to hamper his style.

Appropriately, Professor Wreszin calls the hundred-page section of his biography that is devoted to Macdonald's political furlough at *The New Yorker* "Criticism as a Substitute for Politics." With the collapse of *Politics*, moreover, he broke up his marriage to Nancy Macdonald, grandly declaring that "the only responsibilities, duties, obligations I will accept are those that I want to, those I choose to, freely and spontaneously"—the last remaining vestige, perhaps, of the anarchist philosophy he had adopted during the war but which he now pretty much abandoned along with the wife who had supported his anarchist journal. Inevitably, this section of Professor Wreszin's book has its longueurs. Macdonald's most ambitious intellectual effort of this period was his essay

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called "Masscult and Midcult," a study of popular culture in which all of the author's snobberies are on full display and which contains little, if any, understanding of what the loss of middlebrow culture would mean when it was supplanted by the degraded simulacrum that has now taken its place.

Except for its account of the shenanigans surrounding Macdonald's brief attachment to *Encounter* and his quarrels with the Congress for Cultural Freedom, Professor Wreszin's book doesn't get going again until it is time to tell the story of Macdonald's return to politics as a born-again radical in the Sixties. This story really *is* an example of history repeating itself as farce, and rather a grim farce at that.

1965: "Dwight was quick to give his support and name to an Artist Protest Committee, which published a large ad in the *New York Times* with over 630 signatures. The ad called on all Americans to end their silence and speak out against the war. Dwight's name could be found among the likes of the screenwriter Alvah Bessie, the actor Howard Da Silva, Howard Fast, and Corliss Lamont, all of whom he had seen as contemptible apologists for Stalin a little over a decade earlier."

1968: "The clincher was a phone call Dwight made to Fred Dupee to inquire about the situation [at Columbia University]. Dupee responded with enthusiasm: 'You must come up right away, Dwight. It's a revolution! You may never get another chance to see one.' . . . Dwight loved it. It was as though a 'Victorian father had been removed from his family's bosom (or neck).' Later when he saw [President] Grayson Kirk on television complaining of student anarchy and barbarism, he felt his image was on target."

1970: "On Thursday April 30 he made the trip to New Haven to show solidarity with the liberal-left elements on [the Yale] campus. . . . He came away feeling good about the entire affair. Defending his activities and alliance with the New Left to the harshly critical Nicola Chiaromonte, Dwight stoutly defended his support of the Panthers . . ."

It was *épater les bourgeois* to the end. And in the end the only thing that survives is the literary anthology called *Parodies* (1960), in which the aesthete in Macdonald kept faith with the spirit of the Hedonists circle at Exeter in the Twenties. But then, of course, Macdonald's career was itself a parody of the radical vocation in our time.

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Without rancor: Sybille Bedford's achievement

by Roger Kimball

Le passé est une partie de nous-même, la plus essentielle peut-être.
—Victor Hugo

Beware of being sheep.
—Sybille Bedford

For more than four decades, the German-born English writer Sybille Bedford has been something more than a name one has heard, something rather less than a literary celebrity. Those who know her work tend to be keenly enthusiastic; not enough people do know it. Hers is a many-sided talent. She is first of all a novelist: there have been four novels to date, *A Legacy* (1956), *A Favourite of the Gods* (1963), *A Compass Error* (1968), and *Jigsaw* (1989). Almost by accident, she is also a biographer. Her two-volume biography of Aldous Huxley—which she undertook after his death at the behest of his family—appeared in 1973-74. It is a work of *hommage*. She had met Huxley and his first wife, Maria, in the spring of 1930 when she was living with her mother in the South of France; the Huxleys did them many kindnesses and became close friends. Even before that, Huxley had been a prime intellectual inspiration for Mrs. Bedford. She speaks somewhere of his being a "moral idol," a "universal genius." His novels, which she discovered in the mid-1920s, were an "overwhelming revelation." In the event, Sybille Bedford produced a widely praised biography that managed to be admiring without being hagiographic. It was an enormous labor, made especially difficult by the fact that Huxley's library and all his papers perished when his house in Los Angeles burned down in 1961, two years before his death.[1]

Like Elizabeth David or M. F. K. Fisher, Mrs. Bedford is also a food and wine writer who is more than a food and wine writer. Like Rebecca West, she has produced sharply observed legal reportage as well as fiction. *The Trial of Dr. Adams* (1958)—published in England as *The Best We Can Do*—is a riveting day-by-day account of the trial of Dr. John Bodkin Adams—a *cause célèbre* in its day—who was accused of murdering several elderly patients in order to obtain promised legacies. Another book, *The Faces of Justice* (1961), is a collection of trial reports and anecdotes about the workings of the English, German, Swiss, French, and Austrian legal systems in the 1950s. Written partly tongue in cheek—acquaintance with courts of law encourages an appreciation of the varieties of human extravagance—it has nonetheless been used at some law schools to introduce students to the—niceties? complexities? impossibilities?—of comparative law. Seeking "the best we can do" when it comes to justice—she deliberately stayed

1 Huxley was more than stoical in the face of this devastating conflagration. In a letter to Robert Hutchins, he remarked that "I am evidently intended to learn a little in advance of the final denudation, that you can't take it with you."

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away from places like Spain, Portugal, and countries behind the Iron Curtain—Mrs. Bedford discovered that even at its best humanly administered justice is often blind in more than the desired sense of being impartial.

Her curiosity about the law is part of a larger curiosity, an appetite for the human panoply. Like Evelyn Waugh or Graham Greene, Mrs. Bedford is a novelist who is also an inveterate traveler and travel writer; unlike them her passion has not been pinched by bitterness or blunted by *accidia*. Her first published book, *The Sudden View: A Mexican Journey* (titled *A Visit to Don Otavio* in England), is a travelogue born of restlessness. She had been a few years in the United States; it was time to return to England; the prospect of Mexico beckoned and seduced her. (How many important travel books Mexico has inspired this century!) "I had a great longing to move, to hear another language, to eat new food; to be in a country with a long nasty history in the past and as little present history as possible." *The Sudden View* is the record of a cultivated twentieth-century European's year in the existential detour that was Mexico after the war. Most of it takes place at a ramshackle eighteenth-century hacienda near Guadalajara that was inhabited by "Don Otavio de X y X y X," their host and son of the former Governor of the province. It is an antique world, full of antique prerogatives. Don Otavio, we learn, "has been ruined these thirty years. He has seventeen servants to look after him."

The story of *The Sudden View* was recollected in tranquility and written several years after the fact. It was, Mrs. Bedford recently commented in an interview with Shusha Guppy, "a travel book written by a novelist. I wanted to get across the extraordinary beauty of Mexico, the allegro quality of its climate, with the underlying panic and violence inherited from a long and bloody history." *The Sudden View* does that, and more. It is funny, affectionate, and, like other good travel books from the period, ruthlessly alive to idiosyncrasy:

> I bought a Manual of Conversation. In the section headed *Useful Words and Phrases*, I find on page one:
>
> "Are you interested in death, Count?"
>
> "Yes, very much, your Excellency."

The Sudden View appeared in 1953. It was not an early debut. Mrs. Bedford, forty-two when the book appeared, had for some years been eking out a living by miscellaneous journalism, secretarial work, and a spot of translating. A peripatetic childhood spent shuttling between Italy, the South of France, and London had afforded little opportunity for school but had left her comfortably multilingual if orthographically challenged. By the late Forties, she had found time to complete three novels. All had made the rounds with publishers; none had seen (or was to see) the light of day. Her latest novel, *Jigsaw: An Unsentimental Education*, is called "A biographical novel." Like all her novels, it is really more an autobiographical one. In *Jigsaw*, Mrs. Bedford mentions that she titled her first novelistic effort *An Expense of Spirit*. She tells us: "an unkind friend added, *In a waste of time*." "Not unexpectedly, it was diluted Aldous Huxley—Aldous Huxley and plain water." Apparently, Huxley concurred, offering pages of detailed criticism from which she quotes in her biography; his strictures were "good advice," Mrs. Bedford admits, but "pretty shattering at the time."

The Sudden View brought Sybille Bedford critical recognition. Her next book, *A Legacy*—a novel, at last—won her a measure of popular acclaim as well. But its success was neither immediate nor total. The London *Times* dismissed it as opaque; her American publisher helpfully pronounced it one of the dullest books he'd ever read. Today it is generally regarded as a masterpiece, albeit one that goes largely unread. The happy *peripeteia* came when Evelyn Waugh reviewed *A Legacy* for *The Spectator*. He registered a handful of problems—could the nine-year-old narrator really have comprehended this or that bit of information? Did events always unfold with sufficient clarity?—that kept the book from "extreme excel-

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lence." But his endorsement was unequivocal: *A Legacy* was a "remarkable achievement" in which "everything is new, cool, witty, elegant." In time the book caught on, especially in the United States, where it became a best seller. Though other of her books have been honored—*Jigsaw* was short-listed for the Booker Prize—*A Legacy* remains her only commericial triumph.

It was Nancy Mitford who had sent *A Legacy* to Waugh. Clearly, the book had taken him by surprise. "We know nothing of the author's age, nationality or religion," he wrote in his review. "But we gratefully salute a new artist." To Mitford he wrote that "I wondered for a time who this brilliant 'Mrs. Bedford' could be. A cosmopolitan military man, plainly, with a knowledge of parliamentary government and popular journalism, a dislike for Prussians, a liking for Jews, a belief that everyone speaks French in the home." He concludes by announcing that "Mrs. Bedford" must be the *nom de guerre* of Nancy Mitford's lover, "the Colonel," Gaston Palewski. Mitford replied that, in fact, Mrs. Bedford was "a small, fair, intensely shy woman. . . . There is something very *sweet* about her."

"Sweet"? Well, sweet as Nancy Mitford was sweet, perhaps. "Shy" may be closer to the mark, or "reticent." It is curious how little, even now, is *directly* known about Sybille Bedford. Perhaps no one will any longer pretend to mistake the author of *A Legacy* for "a cosmopolitan military man." But she remains a somewhat shadowy figure. One recent article, from the 1980s, states that "Sybille Bedford was born 16 March 1911, daughter of Maximillian van Schoenebeck and Elizabeth Bernard. She married Walter Bedford in 1935. That is absolutely all the personal information she has supplied to the usual biographical sources." From book jackets, encyclopedia articles, and so on we glean also that she was awarded an OBE in 1981, that she is a vice president of PEN, and that she grew up largely in England, France, Italy. We know that she was born in Charlottenberg, Germany (a suburb of Berlin), that her mother was part Jewish, that she was brought up Catholic, that she early on lost whatever faith she had.

But what of Walter Bedford, for example, whom the young Miss Schoenebeck married in 1935? He seems to have disappeared without trace—or at least without mention. One fan of Sybille Bedford's suggested to me that it was a bit like the champagne Veuve Cliquot, "widow Cliquot": one hardly pauses to contemplate the fate of Monsieur Cliquot when such delicious effervescence is at hand. Perhaps *A Compass Error*, Mrs. Bedford's third novel, contains a clue. Near the end of the novel, we are told that Flavia, this novel's version of the author, "contracted what was looked on as a wasteful if not scandalous marriage to a man twice her age, a homosexual, of undoubted brilliance and initial talent, who drank too much and was then already an established failure." It seems clear, at any rate, that the marriage was a desperate alliance—neither Flavia nor the narrator of *Jigsaw* is interested in men as sexual partners—though it is characteristic of Sybille Bedford that she has exercised complete discretion about the fate of this union.

If Mrs. Bedford is sparing about direct statements, however, *indirectly* she has been consistently more revealing. Sybille Bedford is not a novelist—like Dickens, say—who conjures new worlds out of whole cloth and populates them with creatures of her own imagining. Rather, her novels are imaginative reorderings of the past—of her own past—efforts to extract some human truth from the specific dramas that life has presented her. She has taken to heart Victor Hugo's observation that "the past may be the most essential part of ourselves" and elevated it into the organizing principle of her fiction. (The sentence from Hugo stands as one of the epigraphs to *A Compass Error*.) To some extent—to a larger extent than one might have supposed—she and her family and friends compose the *dramatis personae* of her fiction. Are the portraits true to life? the narrator asks at the beginning of *Jigsaw*. "I think so, give and take a novelist's margins."

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In essentials, it seems, the margins have tended to be quite narrow. This does not mean that her novels are uniformly compelling. Nancy Mitford was right when she complained (in another letter to Evelyn Waugh) that Mrs. Bedford's second novel, *A Favourite of the Gods*, though it contained "excellent things," betrayed "a certain naïveté" and left the reader feeling that "the characters are of wood." The characters are perhaps less wooden in the sequel, *A Compass Error*, but a feeling of unreality—of a past incompletely revisited—persists.

Mrs. Bedford's most vividly realized novels to date are *A Legacy*, an autobiography in the form of a novel, and *Jigsaw*, a novel in the form of an autobiography. *A Legacy* takes place primarily in Berlin and Baden around the turn of the century. It is a story of collisions: between the decaying Catholic aristocracy of Southern Germany and the rich Jewish mercantile establishment of Berlin; between Bismarck's militantly nationalistic Prussia and the Francophilic culture of the South; between the old world in which duty and social position define one's compass and the fast, new society that seemed bent on dissolving everything. Atmospherically, the world of *A Legacy* is a cross between *Buddenbrooks* and Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*: over-ripe, brittle, ironic, pregnant with cataclysm; stylistically, it has learned a lot from the pyrotechnics of the early Evelyn Waugh.

The complex plot of *A Legacy* unfolds around three families. There are the von Feldens: the Baron Augustus and his four sons, Gustavus, Julius, Johannes, and Gabriel. They are "old, landed, agreeably off without being in the least rich." They speak French at home, except to their Frenchless priest, with whom they get by in imperfect Latin. They are the opposite of forward-looking. "The French Revolution was still alive with them as a calamity, and of the Industrial one they were not aware." There are the von Bernins, a neighboring Catholic family, richer, worldlier, and considerably more zealous than the von Feldens. The beautiful Clara von Bernin, "who was so unbending, who when sent by her father to a dance would not dance but prayed, almost audibly, for those present," is eventually prevailed upon to marry the eldest von Felden, Gustavus. "She spoke of what together they might do: . . . for salvation, for the poor. Purpose. Elevation. Infinity. It was magnifying, it was heady; it was new. And it was also clear that it was brought about because Clara von Bernin Sigmundshofen found him irresistible as a man."

And then there are the Merzes: an old, very rich bourgeois Jewish family ensconced in a Berlin mansion. Intensely inward-looking, they "had no friends, a word they seldom used; they saw no-one besides the family, the doctor, and an occasional, usually slightly seedy, guest asked to occupy the fourteenth place at the table." Grandpapa Merz had a partial exception to this rule: he liked to brighten his afternoons with "the company of a shapely leg," "this being literally the one perfection" he insisted on. Alas, none of his female companions—recruited from proper Prussian society—lasted long: "The old gentleman had tried to push a bank note under the garter of Fräulein zu der Hardeneck, and has called Frau von Kummer his little mouse." Gottlieb, the family butler, "saw to the successors." Grandmama Merz, short, plump, "with features that escaped attention," looked on without comment. The Merz household also included two daughters, Flora and Melanie, both of whom were destined to die young from consumption, the second son, Friedrich, and Eduard, the eldest, "a Clubman, a rake, a gambler, and at sixty a bankrupt." In the Eighties and Nineties, Eduard's debts had been paid eleven times by his father, three times by his wife, Sarah, a "worldly, clear-brained woman" who buys Monets and is an heiress to an aniline fortune.

At the center of *A Legacy* is the domestic career of Julius von Felden, a high-strung, self-absorbed aesthete who travels with pet chimpanzees and has mastered the art of keeping reality at arm's length. He works

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briefly in the diplomatic service, finds that he doesn't much like Germany, and doesn't understand why he cannot be given another country to represent. Julius is damaged goods, clearly, but he is also unflaggingly amiable and attractive to women. It emerges that Sarah Merz is in love with him. And yet it is she who connives to marry him off—twice: first to the delicate Melanie Merz, who is twenty years his junior and (it may be Melanie's chief attraction for him) whose parents provide him with a handsome allowance to live on. Melanie produces a daughter and then conveniently sickens and dies. The Merzes continue Julius's allowance, however, and even increase it ten years later when Sarah helps him procure her friend Caroline Trafford—an "English gentleman," beautiful, predatory, bored—as his second wife. The marriage cannot, does not last; but it, too, produces a daughter, the book's narrator. I believe it is on page 344 that we first learn that her name is Francesca; anyone familiar with the lineaments of Mrs. Bedford's life has all along known that the hitherto nameless Francesca is she, that the story she tells is the story of young Sybille Schoenebeck.

Of course there are other stories, as well. *A Legacy* is an intricately wrought group portrait full of period touches and interlocking fates, generally unhappy. Much of the plot turns on the personal tragedy of Julius's younger brother, Johannes, a decent, gentle boy who is brutalized at a Prussian-style military academy, escapes, and tries to kill himself by eating a handful of sulpher matches rather than be sent back. Johannes goes mad, but this does not prevent bureaucratic incompetence from giving him a commission and setting him up with an army career in an out-of-the-way post. His private disaster reverberates throughout the book, indirectly causing the death of Gabriel von Felden, the suicide of his brother Gustavus, and precipitating a national scandal that ruins dozens of careers and comes close to bringing down the government.

Mrs. Bedford handles the twistings and turnings of her story with remarkable deftness and charm. Indeed, it is one of her major achievements to have related this harrowing tale in a manner that leaves the reader as much seduced by the rich, sensuous world in which her characters perform as he is chastened by their folly. She does it partly with food. Here are the Merzes enjoying their mid-morning snack:

> They were at second breakfast. Second breakfast was laid every morning at eleven-fifteen on a long table in the middle of the *Herrenzimmer*, a dark, fully furnished room with heavily draped windows that led from an antechamber to an antechamber. The meal was chiefly for the gentlemen. They ate cold Venison with red-currant jelly, potted meats, tongue and fowl accompanied by pumpernickel toast and rye-bread, and they drank port wine. Grandmama sat with them. She had a newly-laid egg done in cream, and nibbled at some soft rolls with *Spickgans*, smoked breast of goose spread on butter and chopped fine. Grandpapa had a hot poussin-chicken baked for him every day in a small dish with a lid; and Cousin Markwald who had a stomach ailment ate cream of wheat, stewed sweetbreads and a special kind of rusks.

It is a good idea to read *A Legacy* within easy reach of the larder.

Victuals also play a background role in some of the book's wittiest episodes. Here is Sarah—it's a little unclear whether she's at lunch or dinner—preparing to tell the Merzes that Julius will require their daughter to convert to Catholicism before the marriage can take place.

> [S]he sat almost silent through the cream of chicken, the crayfish in aspic, the vol-au-vent, the calf's tongue and currants in Madeira, the chartreuse of pigeon and the mousseline of artichokes, and it was only after the Nesselrode pudding and Melanie [was] sent upstairs that she disclosed that Jules Felden appeared to think it necessary for his wife to share his religion.
>
> "*He wants her to get baptized.*"

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"*The young man with the monkeys wants our daughter baptized.*"

Part of the comedy is that although Julius demands a Catholic bride and the Merzes won't hear of it, neither has any *religious* stake in the matter. Sarah sums it up well: "theological dead-lock between non-practising members of two religions": in other words, the way of the world.

In the end, it is poor Melanie who breaks the deadlock. One evening, she slips out with her maid and "a small purse of gold" to obtain the required sacrament; her maid directs her to a church; a Pastor Völler performs the ritual sprinkling; Melanie returns home in a state of high excitement and bursts in on the assembled company:

> "Pastor Völler—"
>
> "Not Pastor, dear, *Father*. We call our priests Father."
>
> "Father Völler," said Melanie.
>
> "Do I know him?"
>
> Melanie tendered the certificate she carried in her dress.
>
> Clara, already a little far-sighted, held it at arm's length. She looked, frowned, shifted the distance again, looked, her lips moving—Then she emitted a faint hissing sound, and swayed. Gottlieb was in time with the chair.
>
> Grandmama proffered her *sal volatile*. Clara stirred. "A Protestant," she groaned, and to everyone's consternation slipped from the chair to the floor. "On our knees, my child! and may He have mercy on us."
>
> Grandmama signed to Gottlieb. "Bring the poor lady an egg in port wine."
>
> But Clara, who had taken nothing since the previous day, waved sustenance aside. She rose and said in a strong voice, "It is His Will that you should pass through this abominable trial. I may have been sent to lead you out of it. We must not allow heresy to take root in you, we must send for a priest at once. This is an emergency and I believe you will be received. Instruction can come later."
>
> The gasp this time came from the arm-chair. "They want to baptize her twice!" cried Grandmama and sank back into the cushions.
>
> Gottlieb turned and presented the egg-nog on the tray. Grandmama took it.

In a sense, all of Mrs. Bedford's novels tell the same story: they are so many portraits of Sybille Bedford as a girl or young woman. Much of what seems most extravagant turns out to be closest to what really happened. In *Jigsaw*, a novelist's attempt to arrange the pieces of life's puzzle into emotional order, she writes that "To say that Jules, the Julius von Felden of the novel, was my father would be as misleading as to say that he was not." Well, yes. But we learn that her father, like Julius von Felden, spoke French and kept chimps as pets; that he had three brothers; that one committed suicide; that one was sent to a military academy, escaped, and swallowed a handful of sulpher matches (he did not, however, go mad). As with Julius, after her father's first wife died he continued to be supported by his first wife's parents: "it had not occured to them not to go on treating him as their son-in-law." Even those fabulous Merz dinners were true to life: the inhabitants of the great Berlin mansion, Mrs. Bedford writes, "never stopped eating."

In *A Legacy*, the narrator's eyes are primarily on her family. In *Jigsaw*, a mirror is introduced: now young Sybille not only directs the action but also has a leading role in the story. *Jigsaw* takes her from early childhood through her mid-twenties. The story opens with a few fragmentary memories of being bundled hither and yon with her mother. Then there is the war. Then armistice. The family fortunes are ruined and so is her parents' marriage. Sybille is left with her father and an elderly retainer at a delapidated Schloss at Feldkirch in Baden. They are very poor. Her father, "a man who has lost his nerve," "protects himself by limiting his grasp." Decades older than his wife, he has retreated into himself. After a few years, Sybille is sent to visit her mother in Florence. A few months later, her father comes down with appendicitis and dies.

Now the story begins in earnest. It is a tale of life with—and very much without—

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mother. In a prefatory note to the book, Mrs. Bedford says that she and her mother are "a percentage" of themselves. This much is clear: her mother was clever, literary, and strikingly beautiful; she was also a study in eccentric irresponsibility. The ten-year-old Sybille did not make it to Florence on that first trip; she got off the train in the Austrian Trentino to meet her mother who was on her way to rendezvous with "O.," "a painter of some reputation" whom she was planning to marry. Sybille is left at the hotel in the care of a teenaged girl while her mother pursues the affair. There are other suitors, chiefly Alessandro, an aspiring architect twenty years younger than Sybille's mother. At first, life is unsettled: Capri, Sicily, Palermo, Taormina, Syracuse.

> "Are we on the run, mummy?"
> "You might call it that."

Eventually, Alessandro wins out and a pattern is established. Sybille is sent to England to stay with friends while Alessandro and mummy depart for Africa. Life in England is punctuated with long visits to Italy.

As the Twenties progressed, Mussolini prospered and Italy became distinctly less hospitable for free spirits. By 1926, Sybille's mother has established herself in Sanary-sur-Mer, a small Mediterranean village between Marseilles and Toulon. The England–Italy pattern gives way to England–France. When in London, Sybille is officially looked after by two German-Jewish sisters, Toni and Rosie Falkenheim. Toni is married to a bookseller called Jamie Nairn, Rosie is carrying on a comically clandestine affair with a judge. Sybille is pretty much left to her own devices. By the time she is sixteen, she has her own bedsitter in Upper Gloucester Place. There's a bit of schooling. But mostly she is "privately educated," which meant self-taught. She absorbed Flaubert and Stendhal; she read through volumes of Balzac and Maupassant; a little Zola, some Alfred de Vigny, Chateaubriand, and George Sand; she also read Huxley, Waugh, and Ivy Compton-Burnett. There are domestic tragedies: Toni precipitously divorces Jamie after he admits to having had an affair; the judge, for all his discretion, turns out to be a compulsive gambler. He gets in over his head once too often and commits suicide. All this, or something very like it, happened. But while Sybille and her mother appear *in propriis personis*, most of the other characters appear pseudonymously. Mrs. Bedford's sense of delicacy in this matter is as laudable as it is rare. "I shall not name names," she writes.

> The Nairns were not called Nairn, nor were the Falkenheims [called Falkenheim]. . . . Why, might one ask, after all those years and in our tell-all age? Chiefly because they are people seen only through my eyes: it would be impertinent and in some cases hurtful to publish my, necessarily one-sided, view of people who though they themselves be dead may still be held in affection and esteem, let alone be seen in different lights, by their descendants, friends and colleagues.

London was one half—or a third—of Sybille's life in the late Twenties and early Thirties. The other, larger part was Sanary: sleepy, unfashionable Sanary. In the late Thirties, the village became an enclave for German Jews escaping from Hitler. (Thomas Mann was among their number; he is said to have proposed marriage to Sybille's mother, who refused "poor Tommy.") It was in Sanary that Sybille Bedford really grew up, that her adolescent ambitions of being a writer began to take shape. It was not easy going. There were endless daydreams, especially when out swimming. But "when I sat down before a sheet of paper, it was gone. I never wrote in my youth. I was not one of those novelists who filled note-books lying on the hearth-rug when they were tots." Among the pseudonymous personages who populated Sanary were Philippe and Oriane Desmirail, a beautifully exotic French couple. They were part of the "highly educated, upper-class, post-war young, who had lost ideals and aims but retained their manners." Sybille be-

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came friends with them both; with Oriane, she became hopelessly infatuated. There were also the Aldous Huxleys, who appear as themselves in the book: gentle, generous, otherworldly. "One's mood, and behaviour, always lifted to a better plane in the Huxleys' presence."

The book's central drama concerns Sybille's mother. High-strung, insomniac, she always had a penchant for Veronal and other sleeping potions. When Alessandro started having an affair with a younger woman, she graduated to steadily more powerful sedatives. In the end, a lugubrious Docteur named Joyeu prescribed morphine. The last quarter of the book is taken up with the story of her descent into addiction. It is a true *saison en enfer.* At first, Alessandro was enlisted to inject the drug; then Sybille; finally, she learned to inject it herself: three, four, five times daily in ever increasing dosages sanctioned by the perfidious Docteur Joyeu. Near collapse, she finally agrees to enter a sanatarium outside Nice for detoxification. When she is released, it is only a matter of weeks before she begins secretly consuming vast quantities of gin. Soon thereafter, the smell of ether in the house alerted Sybille to the fact that she had returned to the morphine. Perhaps the most horrifying moment in this horrifying tale comes near the end of the book when her mother offers Sybille an ampoule of morphine and enthusiastically encourages her to try it. ("Just once.") When Sybille refuses and returns the ampoule to her, she says cuttingly, "Not enough courage?"

One of the most remarkable things about this tale of woe is the good humor that Sybille Bedford maintains (or remembers maintaining) in the midst of the exasperations and terrors visited upon everyone by her mother. She seems entirely without rancor. In the course of a recent interview with Mrs. Bedford, Shusha Guppy remarks in passing that "Your mother seems a monster." It is difficult not to agree. In *Jigsaw*, she appears as flamboyantly amusing but also selfish, cruel, irresponsible, destructive of herself and everyone around her. But Mrs. Bedford demurs: "She was not a monster at all. . . . She was remarkable: she taught me everything about reading and people and telling stories about people." Such generosity is a conspicuous and very winning feature of Sybille Bedford's work. It is not blindness, for she faces up squarely to the horrid things people do to themselves and each other. But it does bespeak an attitude toward humanity and its foibles. Musing on Toni Nairn's determination to divorce her husband, thus bringing great unhappiness on both of them and her sister, Mrs. Bedford reflects on "the unreasonableness of people and their capacity to hurt each other—if relatively civilized and well-meaning individuals could do so much violence to their loved ones, what about the vast ignorant mass of humanity?" Of course, we know about the vast ignorant mass of humanity. In its deepest aspect, Sybille Bedford's campaign against rancor is also a plea to resist becoming part of that mass. At the end of "The Worst that Ever Happened," her account of the 1963 trial of twenty-two former guards at Auschwitz, she puts it thus:

> We, too, should hear and not forget. This story is a part of our lives and time. It is irreversible for those to whom it happened, the unfortunate men and women who were plucked from home, from family, from cares and habits, from the entire normal context of human expectations. What was done cannot be undone. What we can do is to honour them by memory, to mourn them, to think of them in sorrow and in awe. And we can learn. The SS man's words, "At last we have the means," are true now more than ever. Final solutions are within many a reach. We can remember Auschwitz and beware of listening to the siren song of expediency, beware of abrogating mercy, of setting aside the law. Beware of being sheep.

Good novelists are not in the habit of dispensing advice; but if one were to attempt to cull some from the writings of Sybille Bedford, perhaps it would be just that: Beware of being sheep.

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Wordless secrets: the cinema of Ingmar Bergman

by Jeremy Murray-Brown

The art of film, it is often said, begins at the point where human speech fails. Moving pictures, married to sound and music, enable us to enter worlds beyond the reach of words alone. For the veteran Swedish director Ingmar Bergman, these are the worlds of dream. "When film is not a document it is a dream," he wrote in his autobiography, *The Magic Lantern*. "Film as dream, film as music. No form of art goes beyond ordinary consciousness as film does, straight to our emotions, deep into the twilight room of the soul."

Bergman's dreams have for the most part been nightmares. His films are as far from the popular tradition of Hollywood as Fårö, his Baltic island retreat, is from Los Angeles. Instead he has drawn on Scandinavian drama and his own Lutheran background in Sweden, where he was born in 1918, to create an individual style that is honored throughout the world. Many images from his work shock us still, and they haunt us long after we've first seen them. Looking back over his more than fifty films, the work of four decades, Bergman now says that in no more than two of them has he achieved complete artistic success. In these two, *Persona* (1965) and *Cries and Whispers* (1971), "when working in total freedom, I touched wordless secrets that only the cinema can discover."

This is one of many striking remarks to be found in his new book. *Images: My Life in Film* is a spin-off from *The Magic Lantern*, which was published in Stockholm in 1987 and in the United States the following year.[1] A note tucked away in the back of the new book tells us that it is the outcome of sixty hours of conversations between Bergman and his Swedish publisher, Lasse Bergström, that began after the completion of *The Magic Lantern* and stretched out over a period of sixteen months. At the beginning of *Images*, Bergman says that he became dissatisfied with *Bergman on Bergman*, a 1968 question-and-answer-style book, and wanted to do a new version, "one that would be more truthful, more objective." The two men settled down to view all Bergman's films again. The transcript of their conversations formed the basis of the present text, which was completed in mid-1990.

As a literary work, the book is unsatisfactory, as transcripts of interviews and conversations tend to be. The material is arranged in sections which group films together under headings like "Dreams Dreamers," "Jests Jesters," "Farces Frolics," no doubt according to Bergman's own hermeneutic principles. One section, "First Movies," describes his entry into the Swedish film industry in 1941, but there is no chronological order to the rest of the book and in its disorderly fashion it covers much of the same ground as *The Magic Lantern*.

1 *Images: My Life in Film*, by Ingmar Bergman. Translated from the Swedish by Marianne Ruuth. Arcade, 442 pages, $27.95.

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As the book jumps about in time, so it also cuts in and out of an assortment of voices. Although these are all Bergman's, they come from different sources and sound disconnected to one another. Some are passages from *The Magic Lantern*, others come from earlier publications, and others again from what he calls his workbooks—diary entries that make no sense to readers unacquainted with his life or work, and are often obscure even if one does have this knowledge. In this respect the book is not unlike some of his films, where familiar themes appear in different guises, chronology is disrupted, and references are made to other films, all of which demands of the viewer or reader a high degree of commitment to Bergman's personal style. What many may find the most enticing aspect of the book is its numerous and well-displayed illustrations, consisting mostly of stills from the films and photographs of Bergman at work. There is also a fifty-four-page filmography, compiled by Bertil Wredlund, listing fifty-seven titles with brief plot outlines of the ones discussed in the text. This too is an indispensable aid to readers confused by the way the book has been put together.

The book's drawbacks, however, do nothing to diminish Bergman's achievement as a literary film artist. Under most of the titles listed in the filmography, he is credited as his own scriptwriter. He reminds us in *Images* that it was as a scriptwriter that he first gained entry to the film world. Many of his scripts have since been published and they make powerful reading in their own right. Even in *Images*, the brittle, concise, suggestive nature of his style is everywhere evident. Bergman has also combined with his film work an exacting career as director of plays for the stage, winning distinction as an interpreter both of the classics and of modern authors. For several years in the mid-1960s he was head of the Royal Dramatic Theater in Stockholm. Part of the secret of his films is the experience he brings to them from the theater, his ability to work on a small scale with limited means, and build around him a company of accomplished actors who appear in film after film, their performances now identified as an essential component of Bergman's style. He has also written and directed for television, worked with opera, and enjoyed making television commercials. His energy over forty years has been prodigious.

Bergman's personal life has inevitably been affected by the intensity of all this creative work. He admits that directing has been an erotic experience, a fact borne out by marital upheavals and affairs with several of his actresses. Keeping track of them all through the pages of the book is a diversion from its weightier matter. In 1976 he suffered a nervous breakdown when he was arrested at his theater in Stockholm and charged with tax evasion. Bergman was later exonerated of the criminal charge, but meanwhile he exiled himself in Germany, where he was given a contract at the Residenztheater in Munich and multiplied his various projects. In 1982, with the completion of *Fanny and Alexander*, he announced his retirement from the cinema. Back on Fårö Island, he wrote *The Magic Lantern*, followed by *The Best Intentions*, an attempt in fictional form to enter into the lives of his parents at the beginning of the century, which was published in the United States last year. As might be expected of Bergman, the latter book is unlike a conventional novel. It employs dramatic dialogue as in a screenplay and an ambiguous authorial presence that is disconcerting in its interplay of documentary fact and fictional realism.

The new book's title is also ambiguous, no doubt intentionally. Younger audiences in Europe will mostly know of Bergman from television, since in each case *Fanny and Alexander*, which Bergman wrote and directed, and *The Best Intentions*, which he scripted only, were most popularly viewed there in the form of a television mini-series, both running at much greater lengths than the versions released as films. Scandinavian audiences naturally reveled in nostalgia for the old bourgeois world that Bergman evoked, as British audiences had earlier done

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with Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga*. Bergman says that it was the television version of *Fanny and Alexander* that was the more important to him, the one "I stand totally behind today."

The conversations that were the basis for *Images* concerned mostly his work in film. In their edited form, they focus on the thoughts and feelings evoked in Bergman as he saw each film again, sometimes for the first time since it was made. It's a hit-or-miss approach. Bergman does not take time to explain the films in detail to us; he assumes we have seen and understood them. Much that an aspiring stage director or filmmaker would like to know about his methods is left untouched. Every now and then, often in an aside, he will make us aware of his craftsmanship, and he pays generous tribute to his performers and especially to his wonderful cameraman of long standing, Sven Nykvist. But the emphasis is on his moods, his inner torments, his thoughts of suicide, his bowels playing up at moments of creative tension, his disgust with his own work. The book is about what it was like to be Bergman.

It is not surprising that for such a complex man, this drawn-out process of viewing all his films turned out to be an unsettling experience. "I suddenly realized that my movies had mostly been conceived in the depths of my soul, in my heart, my brain, my nerves, my sex, and not the least, in my guts." To look again at one of Bergman's most characteristic films is to be reminded of the claustrophobic world he's able to create with simple yet meticulously observed details, be it in a country house, a hotel, or a medieval village. In *Images* we can read about the emotional cost of their gestation, but it is not a very enjoyable experience. The intensity of Bergman's presence in the book, his total self-absorption, is also claustrophobic. The films and the book reflect each other.

The most appropriate symbol of this self-absorption is a mirror. It is not surprising therefore that a persistent image in Bergman's films is the mirror, realized actually as a prop or metaphorically in dialogue. His alter egos scan themselves in the glass and are disgusted by what they see. In *The Seventh Seal* (1956), the knight, returning home from ten years on a crusade, enters a chapel to confess, but his heart, he says, is empty. "The emptiness is a mirror turned toward my own face. I see myself in it and am filled with fear and disgust. Through my indifference to my fellow men I have isolated myself from their company. Now, I live in a world of phantoms. I am imprisoned in my dreams and fantasies." In *Cries and Whispers*, the doctor and Maria, one of the two sisters waiting for their third sister, Agnes, to die, taunt themselves in the glass in the spare room where Maria has persuaded the doctor to spend the night. He tells her how she has changed through boredom and discontent; she tells him he sees it in her because they are so alike. He replies: "You mean, selfishness, coldness, unconcern." In *Hour of the Wolf* (1966), the artist Johan, driven mad by his demons and sexual obsession, breaks down and cries out: "The limit has at last been reached. The glass is shattered, but what do the splinters reflect? The void has finally burst the thin shell and meets—the void?"

Bergman seems to attribute his introspection to his dialogue with himself over religious belief, one of the underlying preoccupations of almost all his serious films. His father was a Lutheran pastor and apparently treated the young Bergman to a strict moral and religious upbringing in which concepts of sin, confession, punishment, and forgiveness were prominent. According to his later accounts, Bergman early resorted to lies and fantasies in preparation for his career as a manufacturer of projected dreams. Once he had the opportunity to make his own films, he avenged himself on his father by savage depictions of the torments he suffered, in imagination at least, as a child. The feud with his parents persisted, to be softened tardily in *The Best Intentions*. For himself, the struggle to maintain some kind of religious faith came to an end in 1960.

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> When I made *The Seventh Seal*, both prayers and invocations to something or someone were central realities in my life; to offer up a prayer was a completely natural act.
>
> In *Through a Glass Darkly* [1961], my childhood inheritance is put to rest. I maintained that every conception of a divine god created by human beings must be a monster.

Though the stern Jehovah God of his father's persuasion was thus dismissed from his consciousness, Bergman records a moment later in his career when "the God concept" offered a professional challenge that might have made a profound difference to him. The reference in *Images* is characteristically fleeting:

> My workbook, dated April 13, 1974:
>
> So now I have completed *The Merry Widow*. It was with great relief that I dismissed the troublesome lady (Streisand). I have also said good-bye to the film about Jesus. Too long, too many togas, too many quotations. What I long for now is to walk along my own path. At the theater I always follow others' paths; when it comes to my films I want to be myself.

What Bergman here refers to as "the film about Jesus" was a project to make a film version of the Gospel narrative put together from the books in the New Testament. An uninformed reader of *Images* might get the impression from this entry that Bergman was not seriously interested in the Gospel story. In *The Magic Lantern*, however, he had written more fully about it. The project originated with Italian television, with powerful backers, who sent their representatives to Sweden to offer him the contract. Bergman proposed focusing on the last forty-eight hours of Jesus' life in a series of episodes, each one of which would center on one of the main characters in the drama —Pilate, Peter, Jesus' mother, Mary Magdalene, a soldier from the palace guard who plaited the crown of thorns, Simon of Cyrene, and Judas. "Each of these characters had an episode in which their confrontation with the drama of the Passion irretrievably destroyed their reality and changed their lives." The film, said Bergman, would be shot on the island of Fårö. But the Italians "backed away bleakly" from his idea.

> They paid up with good grace and passed the assignment to Franco Zeffirelli; it became the life and death of Jesus in a pretty picture book, a real *biblia pauperum*.
>
> It was growing darker but I did not see the darkness.

Bergman's rejection of this project can be read as an assertion of artistic integrity, one deserving of respect. But it marked a lost opportunity to let the Jesus of the New Testament confront the demons of his Lutheran childhood. The tone of his dismissal of it is also not without significance. *Jesus of Nazareth*, the film that Zeffirelli made, from a script by Anthony Burgess, was a brilliant attempt to give visual expression to the Gospel narrative and it was enormously successful with television audiences on both sides of the Atlantic. Bergman's choice of words—"a pretty picture book, a real *biblia pauperum*"—reflects his austere aesthetic vision and withdrawal into himself.

He was left with his own existential despair, the mainspring of so much of his work. One of its most moving expressions is found in *Cries and Whispers*, as the pastor, played by Anders Ek, a regular Bergman performer, kneels at Agnes's death bed:

> Agnes dear child, please listen, listen to what I have to tell you now, pray for us who have been left in darkness, left behind on this miserable earth with the sky above us grim and empty, lay your burden at God's feet, the whole of all your suffering, and plead with him to pardon us, plead with him that he may free us of our anxiety and of our weariness, of our misgivings and fears, plead with him that he may make sense and meaning of our lives. Agnes, you who have borne your anguish and suffering so long, I'm most sure you're worthy of advocating our cause.

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At the outset of his career, Bergman was warned by the head of Svensk Filmindustri's script department of his "penchant for darkness and terrible things." In *Images*, as he nears the end of his life, the problem of suffering and of the torment humans inflict on one another is unanswered, a riddle of the universe:

> My philosophy (even today) is that there exists an evil that cannot be explained—a virulent, terrifying evil—and humans are the only animals to possess it. An evil that is irrational and not bound by law. Cosmic. Causeless. Nothing frightens people more than incomprehensible, unexplainable evil.

The dust jacket of *Images* is composed of a photograph of the figure of Death from *The Seventh Seal*. It makes a striking image, just as the character made a striking impression in the film, and it is obviously intended by Bergman to make its own statement about the book and the words the book contains. "First you *are*, then you are *not*. This I find deeply satisfying." *Ars longa vita brevis*? It does not seem that Bergman sees it this way.

> A definite advantage to directing a stage performance is that it dives into the ocean of oblivion and disappears. Films live on. I wonder how this book would have turned out if my opus had disappeared, and I had based my comments solely on notebooks, photographs, newspaper reviews, and faded memories?

Bergman does not rate his achievements highly. Art for him is not a substitute religion. Though he places himself in the same company as the few who he believes have mastered the art of moving naturally "in the room of dreams"—Tarkovsky, for him the greatest, Fellini, Kurosawa, and Buñuel—his reiterated comments about lack of interest in honors and public awards, of which he has had many, are not a pose. His films constitute an *oeuvre*, certainly, but one likely to appeal to only a small following outside northern Europe. Bergman would not mind this. With VHS copies, television extends this following as his films translate to the small screen remarkably well—evidence of the influence of the puppet theaters of his youth on his visual style. His pessimism at the human condition remains, but art can provide temporary relief in dreams. "Don't be sad, dear splendid artists, actors and actresses," the convivial Gustav Adolf Ekdahl says to the theatrical company assembled at the family celebration at the end of *Fanny and Alexander*, "we need you all the same. You are to give us our supernatural shudders or still more our mundane amusements." And a little later in the same scene, addressing everyone: "Let us be kind, generous, affectionate and good. It is necessary, and not at all shameful to take pleasure in the little world, good food, gentle smiles, fruit trees in bloom, waltzes."

It is not too much to hope that this sensitive, complicated, shocking artist will find grace and light at the last.

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The career of Harold Laski

by Edward Shils

From about 1920 to about 1950, Harold Laski was one of the best-known academic intellectuals in the English-speaking world. After Oxford and after two relatively obscure years at McGill University in Montreal, he came to Harvard in 1916, where he remained for four years. He might have remained for the rest of his career, for he dazzled the academic world of the East Coast and particularly of Harvard with his exceptional learning, his spoken and written fluency, his deference to his elders, and his delightfully pleasing personality. He won the admiration and affection of Felix Frankfurter (who discovered him), Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., and Louis Brandeis, and he stood very well with Roscoe Pound, Charles MacIlwain, and other great figures of the Harvard of that day. He was also greatly cherished by the first generation of the guiding spirits of *The New Republic*, which was founded in 1912.

It all ended in an uproar when Laski, with his characteristic knack for arousing a furor and for gaining public attention, became a very visible partisan of the police in the Boston police strike of 1919. This brought down on him the denunciations of numerous journalists, some businessmen, and a few professors; he was saved from a vehemently demanded dismissal by the refusal of A. Lawrence Lowell, then the president of Harvard University, to allow Laski's academic freedom to be restricted. Laski might well have been able to stay on at Harvard, but he was invited to become a lecturer at the London School of Economics, thanks to the support of Graham Wallas, at that time a leading figure among Anglo-American liberal intellectuals and a professor of political science at the School. In a short time Laski became a reader, and in 1927, at the age of thirty-four, he became a professor, which he remained until his death in 1950 at the age of fifty-seven.

In his years at Harvard, Laski's reputation for erudition, originality, and even depth was based on his prolific scholarly production. Between the ages of twenty-three and twenty-seven, he published at least two books, a number of articles in law reviews, and a monograph. He proclaimed himself to be a "pluralist," an enemy of the omnipotent and omnicompetent, omniprovident and omniscient state. His views were closely akin to those of the French syndicalists H. Pelloutier and V. Griffuehles, the English guild socialists G. D. H. Cole, A. R. Orage, and A. J. Penty, and a professor of law at Bordeaux, Léon Duguit. He claimed to have derived his ideas from the great British legal historian Frederick Maitland and the sagacious and almost inhumanly erudite German legal historian Otto von Gierke. In the small circle of Boston Brahmins and Jewish Americans—Morris Raphael Cohen should be included among them—Laski was made much of. They were not entirely ignorant and they were surely very intelligent. They thought

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they had a great treasure in Laski. He did not disagree with them.

Perhaps I ought to add as a surmise that Laski's physical appearance added to his distinction. He was short and extremely thin; he had narrow shoulders joined by a thin neck to a very small head with black hair slicked down and divided in the middle by a wide white avenue. He had a small black mustache. His bright black eyes, seen through black horn-rimmed spectacles, gave him the appearance of an adolescent prodigy. That he was indeed. In some respects, that is what he remained over his entire life.

Laski's biographers, Professor Isaac Kramnick and Mr. Barry Sheerman, have done as well by him as they could.[1] They are obviously not unqualified admirers and they do not overstate the case for him. They concede throughout that Laski did not always bend himself to tell the truth and nothing but the truth; in the course of time, Laski's fabrications became one of his main features. The biographers treat it as a foible. They do not ask whether somewhat lighthearted respect for truth might not have entered into his more serious writings. They say too little about the intellectual qualities of Laski's academic writings. The strongest parts of the book are those that describe his political activities.

In the end, Messrs. Kramnick and Sheerman quote a letter from Laski's devoted and beloved wife, Frida, in which she says that Laski "lived a full life," that they "were wonderfully happy," and that they had had "a lifetime of adventure and interest." That is not a strong conclusion to a six-hundred-page book on one of the most eminent figures of Anglo-American intellectual life of the first half of the present century.

Much of what they tell has been fairly well known to those who knew him, and sometimes they tell less than they should have told. They have, however, done a service even to those who knew him and who lived through his times by reminding them of things they once knew and have since forgotten; they have also produced some quite new and very interesting information, especially about Laski's relations with Jews, Judaism, and Zionism.

When Laski returned to England, the London School of Economics was just beginning its illustrious period under the direction of William Beveridge, who many years later became the author of the "Beveridge Report," which provided for everyone "from the cradle to the grave." For twenty-five years the School had been a sort of night college for ambitious civil servants in Whitehall and no less ambitious clerks in the City (the School was located about midway between these two sections of London). It was a darling of the Webbs and, at the beginning, of George Bernard Shaw—its original premises had been in his house. Although before the First World War the School had had some distinguished teachers and directors, it was not taken seriously in the academic life of Great Britain and it was scarcely known to American academics and publicists. But once Beveridge, who had been an outstanding civil servant under Lloyd George, took the School in hand, it became one of the major centers of social science studies in the world. It attracted students from all over: from the United States and Canada, from India in large numbers, and, a little later, from Africa and China. In short order it added to its staff R. H. Tawney, Eileen Power, Lionel Robbins, Friedrich von Hayek, Charles K. Webster, Bronislaw Malinowski, *et al.* It became a hive of learned men and women. In economic theory and economic history and in anthropology, it became renowned.

Although it was not Oxford, which Laski would probably have preferred, the School was a very satisfactory place for an ambitious young scholar. Laski soon built up a fairly good department at a time when political science was scarcely studied in Great Britain.

Laski himself soon became one of the brightest stars in the School's galaxy. He was

1 *Harold Laski: A Life on the Left*, by Isaac Kramnick and Barry Sheerman; Allen Lane/The Penguin Press, 669 pages, $35.

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a very remarkable lecturer, a speaker of unbroken fluency, patterning himself on the elaborate style of Victorian parliamentarians. He never paused to hem or haw, he never left a sentence unfinished, and he never spoke from notes or a script. His voice was clear and carrying. He enunciated every syllable; he never seemed to lose his way. His lectures were replete with an easily borne and confidently dispensed erudition. All sorts of authors unknown to his audience were spoken of with familiarity. His lectures became a great feature of life at the School; students flocked to them; they loved to hear him and they came to love him too. By the time he became a professor he was also a socialist and that, too, appealed to his innocent students. Later in the 1930s, he announced that he had become a Marxist; that appealed even more to the students of that generation. To his great skill as a lecturer, and his interest in and his knowledge of his students, he added the less worthy charm of making humorously derogatory remarks about his colleagues Robbins and Hayek, who were very antipathetic to socialism and even more so to Marxism. This strengthened further the bond by which his students were attached to him. But as much as anything else, his great kindliness to his students, his generosity, often done secretly but quite properly known through rumors, the fact that he remembered their names and seemed to interest himself in their careers, in which he tried to help them—all this endeared him to them. In addition, his real and fabricated intimacy with the great of the land—and of the United States as well—made him even more attractive to his students.

I surmise that Laski's teaching probably deteriorated in his later years because his exceptionally retentive memory and his undiminished fluency led him to give up fresh preparation and additional study. Of course, that did not show itself to his students because of the rhetorical excellence of his lectures, and because the students were not yet sophisticated enough. Because they did not remain with him for more than a few years before taking their degrees, they did not discern the downward direction. That he was a famous man, and that he was a disrespector of great figures as well as their proclaimed intimate, more than compensated for the deteriorating intellectual substance of his lectures and books.

Laski's intellectual deterioration is more evident from his writings than it was from his lectures. In the books, which continued to appear almost uninterruptedly—there were about twenty-five in all—the deterioration is very evident. Laski was never a hard thinker nor was he a ruminator who pondered at length on ever-deepening problems. He either had an immediate answer to a given problem or he dismissed the problem, often with a witty and knowing remark. His early books, *Studies in the Problem of Sovereignty* (1917), *Authority in the Modern State* (1919), *The Foundations of Sovereignty* (1921), and *A Grammar of Politics* (1925), were serious books; there was also a well-written and well-documented introduction to an edition of *A Defense of Liberty Against Tyrants*, a book written in the sixteenth century. All this before he was thirty-three years of age. These works all showed unmistakable learning in a wide body of the literature of political philosophy in English and French—much less in German or Italian. They were not profound, they had no overtones, but they were clearly expressed. Whatever the superficiality of his analyses, he was certainly a genuine scholar with a very alert and fresh intelligence and exceptional industriousness.

But even then, he seems not to have been a scholar of great accuracy. Laski had a superb memory. It was said that he could read two hundred pages in an hour and could remember most of what he read. He thought that he had a perfect memory, but it was not perfect. He never checked the facts that he cited or the references to the works from which he drew his facts. In his last years he could write an interesting paper with all the semblance of careful study but it was all from the memory of writings read many years earlier, probably not reread since

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he first read them, and undoubtedly not reread before writing the paper.

Just as he spoke, so he wrote without emendation. In my own limited experience with him, I never knew him to revise his manuscripts. One manuscript that I saw—a fairly long one—was written out in his tiny handwriting without a single erasure or crossing-out. I have been told that he delivered book-length manuscripts to the publisher in the same condition.

Even if Harold Laski had been aware of the imperfection of his memory, however, he lived a kind of life that would have made it difficult for him to find the time to restudy the more important books he had already read, to read new ones, to produce new lectures based on new preparations, to verify references, and to check footnotes. (I think Laski never had a research assistant.) He was a proud proponent of the traditional style of scholarship done by one individual working alone, in contrast with now common team research or with one person assisted by a staff of younger scholars who are his "dog-robbers." He did not seek financial support for employing an assistant or secretary. He disliked the influence that philanthropic foundations exercised on the organization of research, i.e., on the new forms of team and assisted research that were beginning to penetrate into the social sciences in the 1920s. At the School, Beveridge was determined to promote this kind of research and to obtain financial support for it from private foundations. This was one of the sources of tension that developed between Beveridge and Laski after a rather happy beginning.

The coming of funds to the London School of Economics from the Rockefeller Foundation and its related foundations was actually a minor matter for Laski. It did not affect him; it was just something to talk and write about. There was something else that affected Laski's achievements as a scholar and that also affected his relations with Beveridge. This was his very prolific journalistic activity.

From very early on, Laski had been a publicist as well as a scholar. When he was at Harvard, he entered into very close relationships with *The New Republic*, particularly with Herbert Croly and Walter Lippmann. When he returned to England, he became a frequent contributor to *The Nation* and a friend of the great liberal journalist H. W. Nevinson. This activity soon expanded to the point where Laski wrote fairly brief articles in great numbers for popular newspapers on the Labour side and for many minor and a few important periodicals in which he analyzed recent political developments in Great Britain and the United States. He wrote about British politics from the point of view of a radical—increasingly radical—member of the Labour Party. By the 1930s, these publications ran into the scores and scores in each year. Many of them were very brief and he wrote them very speedily. In them he often wrote disparagingly of the leadership of the Labour Party; he did not spare the Tories either. These articles written from the point of view of a person who wanted every governmental action to be that of a socialist government or at least to be conducive to the realization of socialism.

Laski often put Great Britain as a whole into the dock. His pronouncements aroused severe criticism in the popular press and resentment among businessmen, some of whom were also members of the governing body of the School. Beveridge, who was probably an irritable person in any case, was irritated by Laski's actions. Beveridge had his heart set on the expansion of the buildings and the work of the School and he wished to raise funds for it from private donors, from businessmen as well as foundations. There was practically no question of raising money from the government for the universities. The new funds had to come from private patrons or they would not come at all. Beveridge was troubled by Laski's incessant socialist criticism of capitalism, which he feared might reduce the financial patronage that he sought for the School.

There might also have been a more per-

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sonal element in the tension because Laski became increasingly critical of Mrs. Mair, the secretary of the School, who was on very intimate terms with Beveridge. (They were married to each other as soon as Mrs. Mair's husband died.)

Nevertheless, Beveridge was unalterably determined to protect Laski's freedom to say whatever he wished to say in political matters and defended him against the intimations of various persons that Laski should not be allowed to continue as a teacher. This was a difficult dilemma for Beveridge: on the one side, he would allow no infringements of Laski's academic freedom; on the other side, he was much annoyed by Laski's "outside" activities.

When he was finally brought to book by Beveridge, Laski responded by stating that he spent many hours every day at the School, intimating that he was not stinting his duties there. He was probably right about this: he seems never to have missed a scheduled class; he also saw numerous students, attended meetings of the various boards of studies of which he was a member, and generally did his ordinary duty by the School. (Whether he did it as a scholar is another matter.) He was also a considerable asset to the School; he helped to make its reputation as a major center of the social sciences. He also made it notorious as a place of "Red agitation." (He was in fact the only person who could, although even then only with some exaggeration, be called an "agitator"; the socialists in the School, R. H. Tawney, H. L. Beales, W. A. Robson, and H. R. G. Greaves, were mild Christian or Fabian socialists.)

Beveridge was successful in his resistance to those who would have abridged Laski's academic freedom, but he did obtain from Laski a promise to reduce his publicistic writing. I doubt whether this gave Laski any notable increase in time for his scholarly studies. All through the latter 1920s and throughout the 1930s and the years of the war, Laski was extremely active in the affairs of the Labour Party, attending and addressing conferences, lecturing to workers education classes, and lecturing to the broader public. He was extraordinarily active whenever there was a general election. The Labour Party had practically no other speakers of equal devotion and popularity at its electoral meetings. In the second half of the 1930s, he added to his tightly packed schedule activities as a member of the Socialist League, a radical group under the leadership of Sir Stafford Cripp within the Labour Party. For a number of years he was a member of the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party. For one very important year he was its chairman. He occupied that position during the year of the dissolution of the coalition that had governed Great Britain under Winston Churchill. After the formation of the Labour government in 1945, he busied himself so attentively and intrusively with the affairs of the Labour Party and the government that he had to be brusquely reminded that it was the government that made policy, not the National Executive Committee of the Party. And of course, despite his promise to reduce his publicistic writing, he still did an extraordinarily large amount of it. All these activities, taken altogether, amounted to a very strenuous mode of life. It left little time for scholarship.

Laski was a frequent visitor to the United States, especially to the eastern states, where he was an enthusiastically welcomed guest in many colleges and universities. At the time of the New Deal, he again felt much at home in the United States, as he thought that Franklin Roosevelt was ending the capitalistic system. He wrote prolifically in and about the United States. Everywhere he was surrounded by collectivistic liberal Anglophiles; such people were very strong in the States in the period between the wars, and after the Second World War, they were linked with plain fellow-traveling. During this period, Laski saw his old friends and was again embraced by *The New Republic*. He made, however, only one new intellectual friend, Max Lerner; this was rather a comedown from Oliver Wendell Holmes,

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Jr., Felix Frankfurter, Louis Brandeis, and Walter Lippmann.

Toward the end of the 1930s, Laski declared himself to be a Marxist. That was true only in a limited sense; he never avowed any devotion to dialectical materialism or to the theory of increasing impoverishment or to any of Marx's economic theory or to any of the other nonsensical Marxist tenets. But he did lay great emphasis on the primacy of "class interests" in the determination of governmental policies. He had however been saying that over and over again, long before he became a Marxist.

The real change occurred in his more frequent use of the word "revolution." There is no doubt that he liked the idea, whether simply as a means to "shock the bourgeoisie" or because he liked the overtones of blood and thunder. He did not say that the "working class" or the Labour Party should make a revolution; he only said that it was probable that they would make a revolution if the government, dominated by property owners, conservative politicians *et al.*, and the civil service, recruited from Oxford and Cambridge, resisted a socialist program enacted by a democratically elected socialist government.

This was a regrettably foolish proposition that he repeated quite frequently. Whatever the niceties of any explanation that would refute accusations that he sought to promote violent revolution, it is a plain fact that he did indeed entertain with some sympathy the prospect of a socialist revolution in Great Britain.

Winston Churchill took advantage of Laski's ambiguous views about revolution and made them a central issue of the Tory campaign in the general election of 1945. After the immense victory of the Labour Party, Laski thought he would revenge himself on those publishers who had reproduced and affirmed Churchill's argument. He therefore instituted a libel suit against a provincial newspaper, probably intending that, once victorious in this minor suit, he would take similar action against the prosperous lords of the gutterpress of London, who had given far greater prominence to the accusations against him than that petty provincial paper had done.

This action against the provincial paper was the greatest misfortune of his career. His adversary engaged the services of the leading libel lawyer of the country, Sir Patrick Hastings. Hastings seized the initiative and, following a procedure of contemptuous rudeness and exercising great skill in all the dubious practices of sharp-witted lawyers, humiliated Laski and hamstrung him from the very beginning. The eloquent Laski was badgered and insulted throughout the trial and he was unable to produce any rhetorically effective counter-arguments to offset Sir Patrick Hastings's diabolical skill. Accordingly, the jury found for the defendant. Laski was left with the humiliation of defeat where he had counted on a brilliant victory. He was also left with the necessity of meeting the legal costs of the defense.

This was a crushing blow to Laski; he was degraded and defeated and was placed under a financial burden that would have required that he sell the library of which he was so proud. Fortunately for him, friends and admirers came to his rescue and the sale of the library was averted. But his poor showing in the interchange with Hastings was an almost mortal blow. It coincided with the Labour Party's pursuit of a policy very contrary to what Laski wanted.

Laski hated Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin's determination to support the American policy of containment of the Soviet Union. Laski was never a fellow-traveler of the ordinary sort. He admired what he thought were the economic and social achievements of the Soviet Union but he also criticized, quite forthrightly, the utter suppression of intellectual and political freedom there. He was always critical of although not wholly unsympathetic with the Communist Party of Great Britain. His published statements about the United States after the Second World War did not differ greatly from those made by unreserved fellow-travelers. His affectionate and inti-

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mate relations with Felix Frankfurter, the friendship of which he was most proud, became more distant. He was also told in very firm terms by the leaders of the Labour government that he was talking too much and was giving a false impression. Laski's defeat in the libel suit and his political relegation by the Labour government for which he campaigned so energetically greatly damaged him. Although he continued with his usual eloquence to teach and to see his students with the same kindness as before, the life went out of him. Likewise, he continued to write but more emptily than before. His death marked the end of the "age of Laski" at the London School of Economics. Michael Oakeshott, a genuine and deep ruminator of original conservative convictions, not at all a party-man, was elected to succeed Laski as a professor of political science. He proved to be as beloved a teacher as Laski had ever been and except among members of the teaching staff and older graduate students, who remembered him with affection, Laski's name ceased to count. The new generation of students knew practically nothing of him or his work. The fact is that his work had been fading steadily.

Today, all that is left of Harold Laski is his books; his teaching and his personal qualities are remembered only by those who were his pupils or by the very few of his still-surviving colleagues who were starting out around the end of the Second World War. His publicistic writings can interest only academic biographers and writers of doctoral dissertations; his public lectures are of course long since gone. For those who would see a monument, looking at the books of his last two decades reveals no such monument.

It is not unusual for an eminence of one generation to be turned against by the next one. Anatole France's fortunes are much like those of Harold Laski except that some of Anatole France's writings can still be read, even though the best of them are fairly faint. He has nevertheless recently been reprinted in La Pléiade. I doubt whether similar distinction will come to any of the works of Harold Laski, although the better ones of his young years at Harvard are still worthy of being read.

Laski's biography had to be done, and Professor Kramnick and Mr. Sheerman have done it in a scholarly way. It would have been better had they placed Laski more clearly in his intellectual environment and been a bit more forthcoming about the merits, such as they were, of his intellectual achievements.

Although this might not have been their intention, they have provided a cautionary tale of an intellectual in politics, a tale of self-undoing by vanity and by neglect of an intellectual's obligation not to sacrifice his intellectual calling to daily politics. They have also called to the attention of the new generation an account of a person who with all his foibles and foolishness was much loved by many individuals and not without good reason.

So what is left of Harold Laski, who was once the linchpin that held together Anglo-American collectivistic liberalism, who was a striking example of an intellectual in politics and an intimate of the great? Apart from the legendary exaggerations or plain fabrications in his half of the *Holmes–Laski Letters* (1953), all that is left are the several interesting works of his earliest years and the recollection of his kindly interest in and his generosity to his students. His publisher Charles Furth of Allen & Unwin—not a radical publisher as the biographers say—once uttered the following words to me: "Harold Laski—the biggest heart in London." To have revived the image of such a man is a worthy achievement and readers should be grateful to the biographers for their accomplishment.

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Poems
by Trent Busch, Walter McDonald, Rachel Hadas & Stephen Sartarelli

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School zone

Fall comes again, but for
those going back to school
it is the beginnning
of the year.
Bus drivers
sit before the vacant
faces that watch down as
we pass them in our cars.

We remember our first
terms, mothers wetting down
our hair with their hands, then
our own children;
now their
children squirm in their new
shirts and dresses, and we
slow to other exits.

Growing up was something
others did then, older
brothers, with no time for
us, catching the car keys,

the blond girl down the street
with a crush on silly
Frank, confiding in us
because we could be trusted.

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How short a time we live,
we say, yet except for
sudden moments when hearts
seem to falter,
                when legs
are air and we lean on
workbenches or the kitchen
table, our minds deny.

We know the lie, just as
we knew then that we would
catch the keys of older
brothers;
                meanwhile we turn
the corner, faces in
the windows solemn still
as they watch us out of sight.

—*Trent Busch*

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Before children

We rose from the snow
where we rooted for truffles
lost in the leaves hogs missed,
gouging fluffed mounds like plows.
With gloves, we never found them,
frozen like trout. We knew they were there,
somewhere, locked in a vault of ice.
Stripped to our thumbs, we dug
till our nails would have bled
but for the cold, hoping to find
more truffles ripe as dark chocolate,
the centers soft, tangy as chestnuts
roasting all day in a cabin
where at night we thawed our fists
and tips of noses up close,
the smoke of piñon and taste of truffles
worth hours without gloves,
stiff fingers starting to flex.

—*Walter McDonald*

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May

As soon as the cold old sun feels warm,
a powerful impulse says *Lie down*.
Down on a bench; in the lap of noon;
on the green bosom of a lawn;
down on a hillside, under a tree,
in mother's absence. In or on,
horizontality's all one.
Effaced each spring a little more
by being forty-two, three, four,
wrapped in invisibility,
I lie and look across the sky.
Near the horizon a streak of green
swells like a harbinger of dawn—
not green like new leaves everywhere,
rather a verdant atmosphere.
I tilt my face, luxuriate—
chin up and eyes shut—in the heat,
warmth that this year feels different.
Spring means all it ever meant,
but the earth where I lay my head
covers my two beloved dead.
They do not say "Forsake the sun."
They say "We loved it, and we're gone."
That golden magnanimity!
Ten minutes is enough for me.
Opening my eyes, I readjust
my mind, eyes, body. For I must
gradually as in a dream
return to vertical again,
stand up and somehow move beyond
my buried mother, my buried friend.

—*Rachel Hadas*

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Mistral

An occasional madness, airborne
from without the seeming calm
of light that softens even underbrush
and stones amid the evergreens,
peasant-house or crumbling fortress
fading ochre to white,
it arrives with a terrible hush
again, multimillenary, recurrent
moaning of the land in submission,
sightless rattle of secured shutters,
polishing the sky a glasslike blue,
thwarting life's heavenward reach to where
the trees still bend southeastward
even when the wind dies down.

—*Stephen Sartarelli*

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Art

Rubens & his age

by Karen Wilkin

When I was a student at Barnard, the star of the art-history department was the exacting, charismatic Julius S. Held, a former assistant at Berlin's Kaiser Friedrich Museum, a world-renowned expert on Flemish and Dutch art, and the college's link with the great tradition of German scholarship driven into exile by the Second World War. If you were an art-history major, you knew that you took the Northern Renaissance course only when Dr. Held was teaching it and that you had to be, at all costs, part of his connoisseurship seminar, held in front of actual works of art in New York museums. (Sometimes, thrillingly, we went behind the scenes.) The most sought-after of his courses was a year-long survey of European art that attracted amazing numbers of majors and non-majors alike; the sheer size of the class was notable in an era when classes like the one I took in Italian language and literature, with an enrollment of three (I remember it with terror), were not unusual.

This immensely popular course filled in the gaps between the Renaissance and Impressionism and made generations of Barnard alumnae into the kind of avid, well-informed travelers who know exactly what and where the most significant works of art are wherever they happen to be. More remarkable, it made us into passionate admirers of the Baroque, no small accomplishment, since at least in my year most of us preferred the modernists to the Old Masters. Nonetheless, we emerged from Dr. Held's tutelage as lovers of Caravaggio—long before Frank Stella claimed him—of Velázquez, and especially of the artist who was the focus of our mentor's greatest expertise: the Flemish master Peter Paul Rubens.

This could not have been easy to achieve, given the paucity of truly first-rate Rubenses in New York—indeed, in America. What made the task even more difficult was Rubens himself, an artist completely unlike the modernist paradigms with whom we were most familiar and who fitted our essentially adolescent conceptions of what painters and sculptors were like. Far from struggling to make an uncomprehending public accept the truth of his vision, Rubens (1577–1640) was one of the most celebrated and successful artists of all time, his work acclaimed and eagerly sought by the most important patrons of his day. Far from being an alienated, impoverished eccentric, living at the fringes of society, he lived in bourgeois comfort, even luxury, surrounded by his family. (Well, there was the second wife, whom he married when she was sixteen and he was over fifty.) Rubens's much-admired erudition and his skill as a diplomat seemed unlike anything we expected from an artist, but his dazzling virtuosity as a painter was, of course, undeniable. Unlike the work of the artists we thought we liked best, however, Rubens's paintings had nothing to do with self-expression or self-revelation. And they were produced, as admittedly were those of any important seventeenth-century

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artist, in a kind of factory, a studio employing countless assistants not only to complete vast commissions for public places but also to keep up with the international demand for works and repeat versions of works conceived by the master.

Dr. Held's knowledge and his enthusiasm for his subject were so profound that we readily accepted his estimation of Rubens's pre-eminence. I realize now, too, that our professor's curatorial background, his intimate relationship with a collection of masterworks, made him regard works of art not as what would now be called "cultural artifacts" but as eloquent objects made by particular individuals. And that made all the difference. Somehow, Dr. Held convinced us of the grandeur of Rubens's conception, and the urgency and intensity of his touch; he conveyed to us the difference between the directness of the oil sketches and the formality of the large-scale studio canvases, and made us aware, too, of how Rubens's bravura brushwork could snap a studio piece to life—getting all this across without stinting on context or iconography or any of the rest of it. And of course, when we made our obligatory summer pilgrimages to Europe, armed with our art-history notes, we discovered how right he had been.

Why has all this come back to me after longer than I care to admit in public? Because of the exhibition "The Age of Rubens," a thoughtful, intelligent assembly of works by the master and his colleagues that provided a splendid portrait of an era.[1] Like Dr. Held's lectures come to life, the show allowed us to track the dominant themes and obsessions of the period, to compare its leading figures with their followers, and even to gain a sense of how artists of the time went about their business, all through a careful marshaling of visual evidence. Organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, this ambitious effort, which brought together important works from throughout Europe and North America, was, surprisingly enough, the first international loan exhibition of seventeenth-century Flemish painting ever put together in the U.S.

The thesis of the exhibition's curator, Peter C. Sutton, the Mrs. Russell W. Baker Curator of European Paintings at the Boston Museum, is that seventeenth-century Flemish painting was "a new art form," neither a variation on Dutch naturalism of the period nor an imitation of Italian models but "an innovative amalgam of the two with its own unique grandeur and vitality." The show's declared mission was "to present all the richness and vitality of Flemish painting" through the work of Rubens, acknowledged in his own day as now as the leading artist of the period, and the artists with whom he was most closely associated, his best-known pupils and collaborators, who include Anthony Van Dyck, Jacob Jordaens, Jan Brueghel the Elder, and Frans Snyders. In addition, to make clear both individual enterprise and typical studio practice of the time, the show featured works, including some collaborations, by more than forty other Flemish artists, specialists in history painting, portraiture, genre, landscape, still life, and animal subjects.

What provoked the burgeoning of this "new art form"? What made possible the remarkable "richness and vitality" so convincingly documented by the exhibition? Not, it turns out, what you might think. Sutton characterizes the images made by Rubens and his contemporaries as "expressive of optimism and abundance," yet, he points out, they were made not in a time of peace and prosperity but in one of bitter struggle and economic instability. Between 1566 and 1648, a span slightly longer than Rubens's lifetime, the Netherlands fought to break free of Spanish rule, and the period was defined by sporadic, often brutal war-

1 "The Age of Rubens" was on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, from September 22, 1993, through January 2, 1994. It is currently on view at the Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio (February 2–April 24, 1994). A catalogue, edited and with an introduction by Peter C. Sutton, has been published by the Museum of Fine Arts/Harry N. Abrams (630 pages, $95; $45 paper).

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fare, punctuated by intervals of truce, guerrilla action, and general upheaval. By the end of the sixteenth century, seven northern provinces had declared their independence as the Protestant Dutch Republic—see the Till Eulenspiegel legend for details—while the ten southern provinces, roughly modern Belgium and Luxembourg, remained Spanish and Catholic. With the arrival in 1599 of new rulers—Philip II of Spain's favorite daughter, the Archduchess Isabella, and her unusually able husband, the Archduke Albert—these southern provinces, known collectively as Flanders, entered a period of relative stability, modest economic revival, and artistic growth: a kind of Renaissance.

As a bastion of unshakable Catholicism in Protestant Northern Europe, Flanders began to contribute significantly to Counter Reformation efforts. As Sutton reminds us, Protestant doctrine downplayed the importance of visual art, but Rome's Office of the Propagation of the Faith continued to believe strongly in the power of the "politically correct" images of the day, and the Catholic artists of Flanders began to play an important role in devising what Sutton terms "a new devotional language." Still more opportunities for painters were provided as the base of Antwerp's economy shifted, in the early seventeenth century, to the export of luxury goods, including paintings, while with increasing prosperity the local consumption of portraits, devotional paintings, and "decorative" images of landscape, still life, daily life, and the hunt kept pace. The show provided ample evidence of how readily Flemish artists responded to this appetite for both religious and secular works, and made it clear, as well, through the inclusion of numerous paintings of mythological and classical themes, that humanism and classical scholarship also flourished during the "Antwerp Renaissance."

This marvelous flowering corresponded more or less with Rubens's years of greatest activity in Antwerp, from 1608, when he came back to Flanders after an enormously successful eight-year sojourn in Italy, until his death. The exhibition "The Age of Rubens" began, roughly, with the return of the prodigy, setting the stage with a selection of religious and mythological works by Rubens's "precursors," as the catalogue calls them. These pictures declared what had been happening at home during his absence. The young Fleming's Italian triumphs were accounted for in a group of works executed while he was abroad, in a selection that demonstrated his accomplishment, his versatility, and his up-to-dateness. They ranged from a fragment of an enormous project for a church in Mantova, a charming portrait of a fresh-faced young member of the Gonzaga family—Rubens's principal patrons in Italy—to a small canvas of an episode from the story of Hero and Leander, a swirl of threatening waves and chains of voluptuous bodies, to a handsome "textbook" altarpiece, all glittering armor, sturdy male calves, and cascading, brittle silk.

If you had any doubts about how thoroughly Rubens had studied Titian, how much he had learned from the Venetian master, or how much he admired him, these youthful works would allay them at once. Rubens's devotion to Titian persisted most of his life; witness the elegant portrait of the Flemish artist's patron, Thomas Howard, the Earl of Arundel, from the collection of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, painted in 1629-30, when Rubens was no young hotshot newly returned from Italy but a mature, widely admired painter in his early fifties. The alert pose, the darkly glowing armor, and the warm, shadowy background of this stunning portrait are characteristic of Rubens at his best—as is the subtle characterization of the sitter as both a general, heroic "type" and a closely observed, tough, sensual individual. But at the same time, the painting can be read as a frank homage to Titian. It's rather like the way Matisse, well into his fifties, continued to paint still lifes that were overt efforts to colonize the territory of his chosen master, Cézanne. Rubens, of course, inspired the same kind of admiration in other artists;

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Delacroix, for example, paid his own lifelong homage to the Flemish master. In "The Age of Rubens," an arresting early portrait of the Tunisian ruler Mulay Ahmad, from the Boston Museum's own collection, simultaneously pointed back to Venice, with its generous drawing and opulent blue-greens, dull olives, and salmon pinks, and forward to Delacroix's most flamboyant and best forays into the exotic. (Just to complicate things, Rubens's vigorous portrait was not done from life, but was a copy of a lost work by a Flemish artist of the first half of the sixteenth century.)

While there were, of necessity, limitations to what "The Age of Rubens" could include of the Flemish master's work—anyone looking for the kind of life-size, ample nudes, all pearly highlights and rosy shadows, that you find in European museums was disappointed—a well-chosen selection of thirty works allowed us to watch the young prodigy mature, to watch the scale of his figures increase, his compositions become more atmospheric and complex, his brushwork become more relaxed and authoritative. The smaller, intimate-scale pictures were no less revealing than their "public" equivalents; the same amplitude, the same generosity of movement through space, and the same animating washes of light prevail. Which is not to suggest that the exhibition was deficient in major paintings. Quite the contrary. We were treated to the Prado's voluptuous allegory, *The Garden of Love*, a masterpiece of Rubens's last decade, with its sumptuously dressed, flirtatious couples, its clouds of putti, its low, golden, late-afternoon light, and its air of endless dalliance, endless leisure, and endless possibility. Boston's large studio piece, *The Head of Cyrus Brought to Queen Tomyris* (*c.* 1622-23), seemed stiff and a little pedestrian by comparison, but it was no less impressive and no less typical of the kind of ambitious, high-quality product that Rubens's patrons could expect.

Although nothing was as spectacular as the immense, magnificent *Descent from the*

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Cross that visited New York from the Musée des Beaux-arts, Lille, about a year ago, among the large pictures the Toledo Museum of Art's *Crowning of St. Catherine* (1631 or 1633) was a stand-out, a loose, relaxed, light-struck icon, at once solemn, tender, and lyrical; whether this was simply a response to the latest Counter Reformation directives on the depiction of saints and the Virgin really doesn't matter. Like all of Rubens's most effective works for public places, the Toledo altarpiece reads from a distance as a powerful, rhythmic swirl of dark and light, but is equally rewarding from a closer view that reveals both the fluidity and painterliness of rendering, and the utterly convincing play of contrasting illusionistic surfaces.

It should be pointed out, however, that no matter how compelling the exhibition's larger paintings by Rubens, the room devoted to his small, intimate oil sketches, made as preparations or demonstrations of compositional strategies, to guide studio assistants or to show patrons what they would be getting, may have been the most exciting portion of the show. The sketches are endlessly fascinating, not simply because their rapid, fluent brushwork and suggestive "incompleteness" make them more appealing and accessible to twentieth-century eyes than the most highly finished, all-stops-out devotional blockbuster, but because they give us the illusion of watching Rubens at work, testing ideas, setting down first conceptions, and exploring alternatives.

Of the artists who worked most closely with Rubens, as pupils and assistants, Van Dyck, not surprisingly, came off best in the Boston show. The selection, which ranged from ecstatic religious subjects to society portraits, gave us Van Dyck at his strongest, whether painting an aged, introspective St. Jerome (a picture owned by Rubens) or recording the elegant black gown and deep red parasol of a steely, Genovese fashion-plate, the Marchese Grimaldi, or making an affectionate study of the small daughter of his royal English patron. Not surprisingly, too, Van Dyck seemed to reach his highest level when he aimed at being most like Rubens and most like the Italian masters that Rubens revered. As for works by other well-known members of Rubens's immediate circle, Jordaens's figure groups were predictably accomplished and earthy, while Snyders's animal paintings were both appallingly realistic and stagey. Boston's *Boar Hunt* by Snyders is the largest, most unforgettable picture of its kind that I've ever come across; I wish, however, that I could forget it.

Among the lesser-known works in the show, there were some wonderful surprises, particularly a couple of portraits by painters somewhat younger than Rubens. Michiel Sweerts's *Self-Portrait as a Painter* (*c.* 1636), from the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin, was notable for its soft modeling; loose paint-handling; rational, geometric composition; and dramatic "Venetian" sunset sky. Most delightful, however, was Jacob van Oost the Elder's *Portrait of a Boy Aged 11*, possibly the artist's son, from the National Gallery, London, painted in 1650. The poised, self-absorbed boy, with his fur-trimmed hat and muff, rendered in a subtle range of earth tones and set against a luminous brownish ground, had the clarity and economy of one of Chardin's paintings of children.

Multiple "conversation groups," genre scenes, landscapes, and still lifes, mostly bunches of flowers, offered vivid proof of Antwerp's thriving seventeenth-century art industry. There were fine works in all categories, although the cumulative effect of a whole wall of stiff tulip paintings was a little daunting—not to mention the proximity of all those gory hunting scenes. Again, while the alert viewer was constantly rewarded with many pleasures along the way—a glowing landscape by Rubens, a robust genre scene by Adriaen Brouwer, a modest handful of carnations by Jacob van Hulsdonck—the end effect of the exhibition was to reinforce the pre-eminence that Rubens enjoyed both in his own day and subsequently, not only because of his evident

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virtuosity but also because of the variety and unexpectedness of his invention.

Rubens, more than any other artist represented in the show—with the possible exception of Van Dyck—seemed to affirm the accuracy of Sutton's premise that seventeenth-century Flemish painting was a unique amalgam of northern and Italian elements. While Rubens's debt to the Venetians was palpable, the fullness, the audacity, and the sheer carnality of his paintings are quite unlike even the most sensuous and vigorous of Italian prototypes. It's flashy, it's theatrical—the way opera, also a Baroque invention, is theatrical—but it's pretty terrific just as pure *painting*, quite apart from anything else. As Sutton declares, this is indeed "a new art form" with its own "unique grandeur and vitality." This was less apparent in the work of most of the other artists in the exhibition. We could watch them experimenting with the latest modes from Italy—a dramatic Caravaggism, a cool classicism, and so on—but few, other than Rubens and his sublimely gifted disciple Van Dyck, managed to digest wholly these adopted manners and transform them into something more individual. (Genre and still-life painters often suffered from a similar inability to transform Dutch models.) What a pleasure, though, to be able to reach these conclusions for ourselves, because of the range, variety, and comprehensiveness of the works included in the exhibition.

The catalogue, a massive 630-page volume, contains surprisingly good color plates of all works in the show, with exhaustive, thorough entries and abundant comparative material for each. There's also what appears to be a very comprehensive bibliography. The catalogue essays, by an impressive roster of scholars in the field, are intended, in Sutton's words, to explore "the relationship of [Flemish painting] to the Catholic Church and the Counter Reformation, official patronage and the market-place, the classical and humanist traditions, and the function of painting for Flemish culture and society generally." Don't be alarmed. These are not exercises in modish contextualism that reduce works of art to what I have heard described as "cultural production." The catalogue, after all, is dedicated, "in recognition of his many enduring contributions to the study of Rubens and Flemish art," to Julius S. Held.

Exhibition notes

"William Bailey: Selected Works, 1964–1994" at the André Emmerich Gallery, New York. March 3–April 9, 1994

One of the most satisfying exhibitions in New York this season is the selection of eighteen paintings and drawings by William Bailey at the André Emmerich Gallery on East Fifty-seventh Street. Now in his mid-sixties, Mr. Bailey has been a quiet but nourishing presence on the art scene since the late 1960s, when he began exhibiting in New York. It is unfortunate that, even today, more than twenty years later, his presence must still be accounted "quiet." Over the years, Mr. Bailey has acquired a number of admirers and his work hangs in public and private collections around the country. But it tells us a lot about the priorities of the art world that he has never had a major museum exhibition. Look around at the contemporary art that it suits the Whitney, the Guggenheim, or the Museum of Modern Art to exhibit: the Mike Kelleys and Robert Morrises and Bruce Naumans of the world always seem to take precedence over what—after seeing work of the caliber Mr. Bailey produces—one is tempted to call "real art."

Mr. Bailey makes two sorts of pictures: still lifes depicting a small assortment of old-fashioned kitchen paraphernalia—crockery, vases, candlesticks, often a few eggs—set centered on a shelf or wooden table, and portraits of one or more women, generally nude or semi-nude. They are, however, all of a piece. Sometimes it seems that his most successful nudes are really still lifes in disguise, sometimes that his still lifes are instinct with the personality of an individual

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sitter. Because he renders every object with painstaking exactitude, Mr. Bailey is usually denominated a "realist." The term is accurate—as far as it goes, which turns out not to be very far at all. You will never encounter a milk jug or salt shaker or a woman such as those you find in Mr. Bailey's work. This is not because he lacks the technical skill to delineate the objects correctly. On the contrary, the first thing one notices about his pictures is their extraordinary technical facility. Mr. Bailey is a draftsman of prodigious accomplishment; the old story about some birds swooping down to peck at a bunch of grapes that the Greek artist Zeuxis painted does not seem so far-fetched when one considers the uncanny skill that Mr. Bailey commands.

The emphasis, however, is on "uncanny." Mr. Bailey's pictures are realistic, even super-realistic; one is sometimes tempted to reach out and test the shadows seemingly cast by his two-dimensional figures. But there hovers about them an aura of ideality that transfigures their realism. This is the deeper source of their power. However accurately delineated are the objects he paints, there is nothing photographic or "transcriptional" about them. Or perhaps one should say that accuracy, even if it is the means to an end, is not itself the end or "point" of his pictures. For one thing, these pictures inhabit a world that has transcended superfluousness. There is never so much as a stray brushstroke to compromise their profound and demanding economy. And not only is everything in its place, but also everything seems to have *become* place. One is coaxed into paradox: The objects and figures in these pictures do not so much occupy given space as they seem to constitute a given space. The accidental has been made over in the idiom of the necessary.

In this context, it is worth noting how often the word "poetic" is used to describe the effect of Mr. Bailey's pictures. The tea cup and mixing bowl and eggs are as ordinary as a tea cup and mixing bowl and eggs can be, and yet . . . The real genius of Mr. Bailey's art is not its verisimilitude but its ability to hold us in ellipses of wonder: Standing in front of his pictures, one often feels "It's only an ordinary still life, but . . ." His best works seem haunted with an element of longing or pathos, as if behind the prim meticulousness of exactitude there were glimpsed some primal lack or absence. I am not sure there is a name for that lack or absence; perhaps it is the vacancy that inhabits contingency itself, that renders every visible thing incomplete because subject to the ravages of time. This all sounds terribly portentous. Which is a pity. For there is nothing at all portentous about William Bailey's art—unless, that is, the realization of beauty counts as a benign form of portentousness.

—*Roger Kimball*

"Robert Morris: The Mind/Body Problem" at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (February 4–April 17, 1994) & the Guggenheim Museum SoHo (February 4–April 4, 1994)

The long-awaited Robert Morris retrospective opened at the Guggenheim this winter, and oh boy! I've seen retrospectives demolish individual reputations, but this one takes a whole era with it: the glory days of the Minimalist movement when works of art were the step-children of philosophical reflection, and when the humid currents of further theoretical musings—mostly in the pages of *Artforum*—bestowed upon them a gleaming aura of high intellectual ambition and achievement.

"Robert Morris: The Mind/Body Problem" was jointly organized by Thomas Krens, the director of the Guggenheim, and Rosalind Krauss, the Columbia University art historian (Dr. Krauss's catalogue essay is yet another of her trademark pieces of obscurantist writing). It presents us with work that may once have possessed a commanding authority but which now looks washed-up, a quaint memento of a time long past rather than anything possessed of any contemporary relevance.

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The real mind/body problem is that Morris lacks a mind capable of producing a body of work that matters. For one thing, he's a shameless appropriator of the ideas of others, namely Marcel Duchamp, Robert Rauschenberg, Claes Oldenburg, Robert Smithson, and, especially, Jasper Johns. Indeed, you feel slightly uncomfortable walking down the Guggenheim's ramp past all those Sculpmetal-covered constructions of body parts and imprints: does Morris think his audience won't have heard of Johns or seen his work?

But in a sense, that is old news. Morris has always been known as a magpie. What is news here, and what this exhibition conclusively demonstrates, is how very few of his own ideas Morris ever really had. (Morris's "borrowing" has not been limited to the artists of his own generation. A few years ago the Corcoran Gallery of Art mounted a show of Morris's recent paintings, all of which were, shall we say, heavily indebted to David Salle and other artists of the 1980s. Fortunately, there are none of them in this show.) The other great revelation here is how trivial and vacuous Morris's few ideas are. It is a genuine shock to walk into a major museum retrospective of a prominent (if not legendary) contemporary artist only to find wisps of ideas—intellectual ephemera, however, which have required the most lavish, complex execution.

Like what? Well, there's a padlocked bronze wallbox with the legend "Leave Key on Hook Inside Cabinet," for example. O.K., perhaps, as a sight gag on David Letterman, but otherwise not particularly arresting. There are also the various mirror sculptures and installations, which play games with mass, space, and visual perception. These rank somewhere between an amusement-park entertainment and a college art major's senior thesis. Even the anti-form sculptures—pieces of felt meant to arrange themselves randomly with every installation—seem nothing more than footnotes to the history of contemporary sculpture. There are half a dozen of these in this show. One or two would have sufficed.

I don't think there has been such a devastating accounting of an artist's career since the Guggenheim's Kenneth Noland retrospective in the late 1970s. What makes this show even more disheartening than the Noland is the knowledge that Mr. Krens has invested the Guggenheim heavily in art of the Minimalist movement. Not only has he brought us this sprawling parade of trivia, he's also spent $10 million to stock the permanent collection with work by Morris and his Minimalist confreres, money raised by divesting the museum of important works by Kandinsky and Chagall. Next time a similar exchange is envisioned, it would be good to have the exhibition first. That way the public will have a clearer fix on what is being gained and lost.

—*Eric Gibson*

"Andrew Forge: Recent Paintings"
at the Robert Morrison Gallery, New York.
Part I, January 5–February 19, 1994;
Part II, February 22–April 2, 1994

The paintings which Andrew Forge has been exhibiting in New York and elsewhere in recent years do not disclose their subtleties—or, for that matter, their "subjects"—at first glance. Their surfaces are composed of deft, deliberate touches of color that fill the canvas or paper support with a field of shimmering fragments of light that seem to address the eye as a species of abstraction. Because the artist's touch is so fresh and his command of color so buoyant, the paintings might easily be mistaken for lyric improvisations, and they certainly offer the eye many pleasures even at that initial level of perception.

Yet, with a little patience on the part of the viewer, these are paintings that soon reveal themselves to contain unexpected complexities. Their apparently random accretions of fragmented color and light are seen to trace fleeting patterns of direct or remembered observation, and the space in the paintings, which at first looks "flat" and abstract, acquires an increasing subtlety and

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depth. An impression of indeterminate and improvised structure gives way to a revelation of masterly control. We are suddenly in the presence of paintings that turn out to be very different from what they appeared to be when we first looked at them—paintings that define a wealth of perceived experience, the experience of nature, that has been beautifully reconstituted and transformed by a pictorial imagination vividly attentive to its myriad nuances and fully in command of the medium of its expression.

Whether he undertakes to work on a large canvas like *March* (1992–94) or in the smaller format of the paintings on paper and board, Mr. Forge is an artist who brings an experienced eye and a delicate hand to every pictorial endeavor. As he has noted himself about his paintings, "They are a long time in the making: they also take a long time to look at." In this respect, as in others, the spirit of these paintings is very much against the grain of much that passes for painting on the current scene, and thus a reminder of a whole realm of pictorial experience that was once central to the art.

Mr. Forge is, in any case, an unusual figure on the current art scene—a highly accomplished painter who is also a first-rate critic of painting (author of, among much else, excellent books on Monet and Renoir) and a greatly respected and beloved teacher of painting (mainly at Yale). As perhaps many others have done, I read his writings for years, and with considerable admiration, before I even discovered that he had all along been an accomplished artist. It is now clear that the art of painting is the central passion of his life, and he is currently working at the top of his talent. For anyone who shares that passion for painting—for the real thing, I mean—these two exhibitions, the first devoted to small works on paper and board, the second to larger works on canvas, have come as a salutary confirmation of a remarkable achievement.

—*Hilton Kramer*

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Architecture

Frank Lloyd Wright comes to MOMA

by Susan Woldenberg

Mounting a show on architecture in an art museum, in which the primary object, the architecture itself, is never able to be seen or occupied or otherwise experienced, is antithetical to the museum's purpose. The one-to-one relationship we strive for in experiencing works of art, viewer to object viewed, is not the same as that involved in experiencing works of architecture. Those who consent to exhibit architecture as art have agreed to a doubly diminishing compromise, whereby secondary materials—drawings, models, photographs, text, and the like—stand in for the work itself while no stand-in can be offered for the first-hand experience of the work. One reason we consent to this arrangement is the fact that the museum is practically the only forum in which architectural education is possible. Another reason is that the attribute of architecture which exhibiting likenesses can never supply—the psychological coming-together of the person and the building—often eludes the building's general user, so that it would not appear to be any more absent in a show about a building than in that user's experience of the building itself. But for those whom buildings do engage, the absence is a sore one indeed.

If ever there was an architect who taught the untutored the nature of this engagement, that architect is Frank Lloyd Wright. His architecture renders space in such a way that we find *our* place *in* it, forging a connection to something that heretofore had been only *there*—intangible, unconsidered. It is through his genius that our "surroundings" are not the furnishings in a space or the setting outside it but rather the nature of the space itself, as Wright reveals it to us in his deft placement of the walls, the ceiling, the openings. Brought into the realm of our experience, this space is as palpable, as knowable, as the sensation of sinking into an armchair. As such, it is thus the architecture that, in representational form, is most compromised by the realm of removal required to mount it on the walls and in the model cases of a museum. Yet where else, short of visiting his buildings, is one to find him? In an irony born of desperation, we flock to Frank Lloyd Wright shows almost as an act of homage, grateful to view static stand-ins for the spirited work of the architect who has most moved us, hungry for an understanding of what he has done.

"Frank Lloyd Wright: Architect," an exhibition now on view at the Museum of Modern Art,[1] was heralded in the daily and

1 "Frank Lloyd Wright: Architect" opened at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, on February 20 and remains on view through May 10, 1994. It was organized by Terence Riley, Chief Curator in MOMA's Department of Architecture and Design, with Peter Reed, Assistant Curator, in cooperation with the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, Scottsdale, Arizona. A catalogue, edited by Messrs. Riley and Reed, has been published by MOMA/Harry N. Abrams (344 pages, $60; $29.95 paper).

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weekly press as a sure thing, and why not? Seemingly, it has everything going for it: MOMA's imprimatur, Wright's public recognition, his prolific seventy-year career, and the granting of full access to the architect's guarded archives by the previously prickly Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation. Add to that the many known private collectors and organizations willing to make loans and you are bound to have enough pieces of the true cross to satisfy the museum and the museum-going public's craving for the display of originals.

With over a hundred thousand original letters and twenty thousand original drawings in the archives, Wright's myriad lectures, his autobiography, and scores of books on the man and his work from which to glean information, it would have been unreasonable, given the breadth of Wright's genius, to expect anything less than an inspiring show. (Wright was a master of presentation as well as of design, and a rousing author and lecturer, who applied his keen intelligence to championing his cause. His letters, often more revealing than his drawings, convey his powers of persuasion, along with his contentiousness, his anguish and, often, his despair.)

The show at MOMA, which occupies much of two floors, is a chronological survey of Wright's work; it includes some 350 original drawings (predominantly presentation material), 120 photographs, thirty scale models, six full-scale wall mock-ups, and a number of decorative elements and objects, some plucked from the buildings themselves. Uniform captions ascribe the year, project name, and location, photograph or drawing type, and delineator, if known. About twenty brief blocks of wall text are interspersed among the displays.

At the entrance to the exhibition is an oversized black-and-white photograph of the man, jowls drooping to complete a thirty-sixty-ninety triangle, nose to mandible to chin, as he leans over a drafting table in either fatigue or extreme old age—the only image of Wright in the show. It is accompanied by two brief if hardly more upbeat paragraphs that include the Wright words "nature," "Transcendentalists," "form," "function," and "destiny" in the tongue-tied manner of a bad translation, thereby serving to remind us that the show is international and that the language of the wall panels within ought not be held to too high a standard in terms of conveying information or ideas.

The show begins in a tone not of celebration but of relative austerity. Six wall panels (black type on white sheets, as throughout the show) containing notes of the sort often included along with family trees in the appendices of biographies are the only life sketch we are given of Wright (e.g., "1867: Born, Richland Center, Wisconsin." Four entries later, "1888: Begins work for Adler & Sullivan"). By the bottom of the sixth panel, it is 1959, the year of Wright's death, and we have already forgotten what year (was it 1937?) he visited the Soviet Union and have begun to wonder whether our memory is failing or whether these panels weren't somehow intended to be dragged along to make reference to later in the show.

Wright's early work is the most illuminating in terms of containing elements of designs to come. It was in this, his "Prairie" period, that he began to practice an unheard-of form of balance in which everything was in flux. Through changes in scale and proportion, ceiling heights, the location of windows, the position of a door, Wright designed architecture as it would be experienced: in three dimensions. Each space was related to the next; each volume flowed out of another. We feel as if we are in his hands as he gently directs us through each sequence. On the exterior, hierarchical massing expressed these changes in a thrilling interplay of volumes, along with strong horizontal articulations, including broad overhangs, flat roofs, and the banding of windows. The "Prairie" house had a center of gravity, the hearth, but never an artificial center of matching halves; the entrance was low, and to one side. When and where did he abandon the easy symmetry, the static plan? How soon did he graduate from the

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haunting Sullivanian melancholia of the trim if decorated tomb?

At MOMA, Wright's work reaches maturity as quickly in the graphic material as in the abbreviated biography—one parabolic curve and two Adler & Sullivan decorative details, and he is on his way. The stalwart Charnley house (1891-92), depicted only in a photograph, is said in a wall label to have been designed by Wright in the Sullivan office. But this is, in fact, a much-debated attribution; it is unclear how much of the house is Wright's work. Though not shown here, Wright's Harlan house and Cooper house projects, outside work from the same period, reveal him in a more experimental mode, suggesting that the traditional four-square Charnley house owes much to its architect of record, Louis Sullivan. Prominently displayed is the Winslow house (1893-94), Wright's first work in independent practice, whose formally symmetrical façade and central entrance recall Sullivan's Wainright tomb. The house is noted for its bizarre pastiche of protrusions popping out of the rear elevation, which is thought to define Wright's "breaking out of the box." Yet if that were so, it was done in the service of a static, unsuccessful interior, only the first-floor plan of which is on display. In the Wright canon, this house was a step backward. It is less a progenitor than a species that was soon to become extinct.

It is Wright's grander domestic projects that receive the most attention: the Coonley, Darwin Martin, Dana, and Barnsdall houses. The Barnsdall and Dana house designs suffered from a lack of rapport between the architect and his clients, while the flaws that beset the Martin house were a consequence of the happy relations that the two men enjoyed. Martin, who was Wright's most faithful patron and friend (he helped him secure the Larkin building and other commissions), kept increasing the scope of the project—a variation on a house that Wright had published as a speculative project in *The Ladies' Home Journal*—in part to keep Wright solvent and by his side. The aggrandizements which Wright consented to resulted in cavernous interiors, made gloomy by lack of sufficient natural light.

Ignored is perhaps the best house of the Oak Park period, designed for Darwin Martin's brother, William (1902). It is a three-story composition of surprising horizontality in its stepped-up massing, and its bright, flowing spaces show Wright at his most adept in the integration of plan and section. Were it to be seen in conjunction with the more solemn Fricke house (1901), we would have the opportunity to catch a glimpse of Wright at work, resolving the one house into the other, modifying the plan, bringing in more light, realigning the massing. But the Fricke house, too, is not shown. For that matter, where is the Isabel Roberts house (1908), also of Oak Park, a flawless working-out of the cruciform plan?

In view of what has been omitted, is it of sufficient value to surround the Bradley house of Kankakee (1900) with, on one side, the depiction of the *Ladies' Home Journal* house from which it was drawn and, on the other, the Wasmuth portfolio illustration drawn from a tracing of the adjacent photograph of its living room? Redundancies of this sort abound.

Among Wright's early office projects was the Luxfer Prism building (1896-97), which was intended to house the offices of a company newly established to manufacture a product that Wright himself had designed and patented: four-inch glass tiles with ribbed backs for refracting light. In the show, we are given only a flat elevation drawing, which resembles a grid of identical large squares rather than bays made up of Luxfer prisms, with no indication anywhere of what Luxfer prisms may have been.

Clearly, every project cannot be shown. But how is it possible, in presenting the designs of Wright's own Oak Park home and its studio addition, to neglect to include either a photograph or a drawing of the children's vaulted upstairs playroom, the prototype for rooms of this configuration in projects to come? Given the enchanting labyrinth the

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home and studio became through Wright's experiments, the inclusion of drawings of its second-floor plan and interior sections should have proved irresistible. Equally astounding, when we arrive at the wall displaying Taliesin, in Spring Green, Wisconsin, Wright's base of operations from 1911 until his death in 1959, we discover only three drawings: the original design and the modified plans for rebuilding it after two disastrous fires. With captions that refer merely to versions I, II, and III, and not a single photograph of any incarnation, how can we know whether Taliesin was more than a dream? Casting about for answers, we find a model that at first glance we take to be Taliesin, but no—it is a model, exquisitely made, of the big-budget Booth house in Glencoe, Illinois, which was never built.

Several handsome art-glass windows of the Oak Park period, from the Dana, Willits, Coonley, and Darwin Martin houses and the Coonley playhouse, are displayed in pairs alongside the representations of the buildings they came from. The rectangular units are hung, in their wooden frames, like pictures—except for the fact that, by dint of the clear areas that surround the bits of colored glass and the lines of decorative caming, looking *at* them means looking *through* them at an expanse of white sheetrock. Given this arrangement, there is little hope of our being able to imagine seeing in or out of them in their intended settings, sunlight setting them ablaze.

In spite of the drawbacks inherent in displaying the windows, they are important in the Wright *oeuvre* as more than mere decorative objects. They amount to a successful accommodation of Wright's talent to Sullivan's intricate free-flowing, three-dimensional ornament, which the young Wright was unable to match. The fretwork Wright designed for the Auditorium building under Sullivan is the least sophisticated of the decorative elements in the completed work. For Wright, wooden fretwork had the advantage of being a flat medium, which could be layered to achieve depth, a sort of lesser third dimension. The nature of the material made it suited to patterns of cutouts that could be *drafted* rather than drawn, hence making it appropriate to the "geometric" rather than "organic" compositions that Wright was able to design. These decorative screens he incorporated early on, for example, in the dining-room ceiling of his Oak Park home, and in the ceiling of the Coonley living room. He used them over light fixtures, as vent covers, and, fitted with glass in the cutouts, as clerestory panels that allowed light to pierce and penetrate the rooms of projects as late as the Auldbrass plantation (1938–42) and the Hoffman house (1955), as well as in many Usonian houses. Their patterns of slashes and ratcheted cuts bear the markings of a favored drafting tool, the adjustable triangle. In another application, this concept led to the concrete-block designs of the textile block houses, some of which were perforated, all of which had this built-up form of three dimensions in terms of depth and relief.

The art-glass windows, with their predominantly rectilinear geometric designs, represent what is perhaps Wright's most sophisticated and lyrical elaboration of the concept of ornament. Shedding the flatness and relative inertness of the fretwork, the windows achieve a sort of weightlessness and non-dimensionality as the designs hang there, on air, yet suspended in the clear liquid medium of glass, activated by the play of daylight and nightlight upon them, as they mitigate and accentuate each view. Designed for and *integral* to the buildings that they serve as a part of the integument, they represent a synthesis that his "Lieber Meister," Louis Sullivan, never achieved.

On a wall to the left of a striking model of the Robie house is the Tomek house, a lesser predecessor, with similar massing and overhangs and the same raised basement at grade that Wright happened to favor at the time. In being shown only the first-floor plan, we find ourselves blundering into the utility rooms when we had every intention of seeing the living areas on the second floor and above. To stranger effect, the Robie

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house display contains more dates than floor plans. Whether or not this profusion of numbers brings a chuckle to those who know of Wright's propensity to pre-date projects (just as he lopped two years off his age) and to have them drawn again and again, always with an eye to posterity, it doesn't excuse a scenario in which the caption reads "delineator Klumb, 1930, Robie House 1908–10," while beside Wright's red square at the lower right-hand corner of the drawing the given date is 1906. Furthermore, if the Robie house is worthy of our attention, why is there not a readable plan that indicates the layout of the living spaces contained in the famous "pinwheel" arrangement of the second floor? Isn't this, after all, what the Robie house is about? A third variant of this scheme, the Heath house of Buffalo (1905), which, unlike the colossal blunderbuss of the Robie house, does not overwhelm its site, is to my mind the most successful of the three. It is not included here.

The relatively large amount of wall space alotted to Aline Barnsdall's Hollyhock house (1916–21) and her other unbuilt projects has been given at the expense of the Freeman and the Millard houses (1923), both smaller, greater feats of domestic design. The compact, two-story Millard house of Pasadena, affectionately known as "La Miniatura," possesses the most refined of the concrete-block designs, a relief pattern incorporating a central cruciform with a square toward each of the four corners. The effect in repetition is mesmerizing: at a remove, the concrete conveys a dimpled loveliness; closer, the walls appear to ripple before one's eyes as light and shadow pass across them. On the interior, the cubelike living room is dotted with the light that penetrates these cuts.

The whimsical intelligence at work in the tiny Freeman textile block house (1923-24), adroitly inserted into its hillside Los Angeles site, yielded a design that eludes depiction. How can one evoke the raised living room, with its paired piers of alternating patterned and unpatterned blocks, laced together by the floor-to-ceiling punctured blocks that peekaboo between them? Or the bolder three-part rhythm—corner, center, corner—of broad expanses of glass? The ceiling, a low cove on all but the hearth side, pops up sharply in the middle where it would seem to be supported by a clerestory halo of perforated block. This room confers upon its occupants the sense of being a child in a tree house, that thrilling combination of feeling thrust on high yet grounded in sheltering safety: it was once enough to make us shout with glee. Is it any coincidence that in plan the room is a child-pleasing square? This is Wright at his most playful.

Only a very wide-angle photograph of this interior, such as the one by Julius Schulman (published elsewhere) centered on the glass doors that frame a view of old L.A. down the axis of Highland Avenue, has the power to evoke some of its brilliance. In the show, this interior is not presented; a photograph in the catalogue focusing on one of the glass corners records an act of technology without hinting at the reason that technology was invoked. As the exterior drawings and photographs of the rear elevation (included in the show) make clear, the room is neither jutting out nor hanging in space; it is merely sited to perfection. Neither plan nor section alone could capture what Wright has made to happen here. No matter—the show does not include either one. What we have is a cutaway model of the windows and concrete blocks. Technology again, leaving us with no clue as to the vision this technology was employed to serve.

It is in the category of full-size mock-ups of construction details and small-scale models of complete buildings that the exhibition at MOMA is most ambitious. A corner wall mock-up of concrete block in the pattern for the Storer house (1923-24), its criss-crossed steel reinforcing visible at the unfinished open end of the section, is useful, though it presents an oddly unappealing mass, overly large for the point it is there to make. The drawback of constructing so *much* wall (some seventy blocks constituting a wall approximately fifteen feet long and nine feet

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high) is the danger that we may read into it more information than it was meant to convey. Viewed from a distance, through one of the slitlike passageways that the curator, Terence Riley, has incorporated into the walls of the exhibition, it attracts the eye; up close, it is an unfriendly behemoth, too large for articulating so little. Its bulk is merely a stunt; the case it makes is against itself. Far better is the more modulated corner wall with built-in table and shelves in the mock-up of the interior of a Usonian house prototype. There, one sees the screwed-together board-and-batten pattern of the wall, its thin sandwich providing scant insulation. (In each case, it is the open end of the wall, where the materials can be viewed in cross section, that offers the greatest amount of information.)

The show's most effective model is a realistically appointed cut-away interior of the three-story "work room" of the Johnson Wax administration building. Originally created for Jonathan Lipman's show in 1986, the model is lit from its ceiling (as is the room in actuality) and inserted into a wall of the exhibit space at a height approximating eye level, thereby enabling us take in the space as if from its mezzanine. Positioned on the floor in front of it, a mock-up of the slender shaft of a Johnson Wax spread-top column, cut off at about the two-foot level to reveal in cross section the steel-mesh reinforcing embedded in the concrete, serves to reify what we have just seen.

On the other hand, a battered rubble wall from Taliesin West (1937-38), Wright's winter home in Scottsdale, Arizona, is nothing but that. It would have been more useful to have included a wall of the rough-hewn, projecting blocks of blond limestone, laid up in rectilinear courses of staggered heights and widths, that was the cladding of many Wright buildings over his last forty years, in projects as far afield as Taliesin in Wisconsin, the Unitarian Church, the Usonian houses, and Fallingwater. Without a doubt, the show's most evocative mock-up is the most mysterious—two pier-like constructions of alternating courses of intricately molded red terra cotta and carved gray oya stone specimens from an unidentified location in the Imperial Hotel, now demolished. They appear almost primordial. Recollecting memories of the familiar old black-and-white photos, who would have expected such a checkerboard of color?

The use of architectural models is a tricky business, probably best understood by the special-effects people in Hollywood who attempt to use them as stand-ins for full-scale buildings. We tend to assume that by taking scale drawings and projecting them into three-dimensional form we have created small but accurate reproductions of the buildings themselves. Yet, accuracy is a matter not only of what we have made but of how we are able to see it. Of the thirty models exhibited in the show, most mounted at counter height, we begin with an aviator's eye view of nearly every one. Looking down upon them, the first connection we make is with their roofs. If from there we lower our sight lines rather than our angle of vision, our relationship to the models becomes one of having come in for a landing. Then, as we look at them with both eyes open from a distance of only a few feet away, our stereoscopic vision enables us to see around corners to a much greater extent than could be explained by the relative difference in our sizes. (When we view buildings out in the world that appear as small as these models do up close, they are more than twelve feet away, which is the distance at which binocular vision effectively gives way to the monocular vision of which most of our viewing of architecture consists.) By using only one eye to view a model from a starting point hardly higher than its base, we increase the reasonableness of the likeness.

Unfortunately, there is another kind of distortion at work that is inherent in the making of the model. To illustrate, imagine yourself inspecting the white cardboard containers of Chinese takeout food. Though the pint holds half the volume of the quart, it appears to consist of nearly two thirds the

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amount of cardboard. This is not an optical illusion, but rather an example of a mathematical fact: as the scale of an object is reduced, its surface area is increased in relation to its volume. What this translates to is that the smaller the model, the more the walls and the ceiling will come to dominate it. It is reasonable, therefore, to assume that to varying degrees our impression of any model is based on a multiplicity of distortions.

As we gaze upon the models in the show, we realize that the ones constructed to the smallest scale suffer from something referred to in aviation as the "dollhouse effect," which generally affects the perceptions of pilots flying at altitudes of over 200 feet. From that height, buildings on the ground appear so small we can no longer transform them in our minds to their full-size counterparts; rather, we perceive of them as existing only as miniatures. Another effect of this smallness is that the models become too cute to be informative; whereas, at too large a scale, they go from cute to clunky.

Distortions aside, models have the potential of showing us aspects of the architecture we might not otherwise see. The model of the Beth Sholom synagogue has the same scale-less appearance of the building itself. The light from within that suffuses the translucent panels of the steeply sloping pyramidal roof conveys an ethereal quality which the building in fact possesses. The immaculate model of the San-Marcos-in-the-Desert resort (1928-29), a terraced three-story complex designed on a hexagonal grid, each level stepping back as it rises with the contours of the site, brings an unbuilt project of great merit to realizable form. In the manner of a portrait, as opposed to studies of an eye, an ear, a nose, the original plaster model of the Imperial Hotel explains aspects of the blocklong building's massing as a whole and the spatial relationships of its many parts that photographs and drawings never could. The shiny red model of the Larkin building—which suggests skeletal steel construction clad in a thin clip-on skin of glazed terra cotta, its windows practically flush with the exterior—is the only wholly misleading one in the show.

In "Frank Lloyd Wright: Architect," Terence Riley has given us a perfunctory and fragmented survey of Wright's output. The life, the man, the clients, the programs, and practically all manner of context are entirely missing. Though Riley entitled the remarks with which he introduced the show's inaugural seminar "Wright in a New Perspective," the show rarely strays from the outlook presented over fifty years ago by Henry-Russell Hitchcock in his book *In the Nature of Materials: The Buildings of Frank Lloyd Wright*. Its Cliff Notes approach is a guarantor that neither new nor entirely accurate impressions of any of Wright's projects will be formed. Rather than talking down to its audience, the show hardly speaks to us at all. Venturing nothing, it is a perpetuation of received opinion. Wright had enough ideas in his head to float a thousand shows, and would stop at nothing to get them across. Yet, at MOMA, it is as if a conscious effort had been made to subdue him. (Even the banner above the entrance to MOMA announcing the exhibit is *cherry* rather than *Cherokee* red.) In the presence of a master problem solver, the mood is one of quiet befuddlement. Certainly we have a sense of Wright's abundance; where is the joy?

By limiting itself to the display of presentation drawings, models, and photographs, most of which had been created by working back from the projects once they had been completed, Riley has created a scenario in which everything points away from an understanding of the design process. Instead of getting a sense of the man at work, we get the whiff of fixative. These are Wright's drawings, and they are beautiful. They had to be: they were the visual aids of a merchant of ideas, pitching his dreams. Thirty-five years after his death, we are beyond the courtship period, beyond needing to be seduced. We know his value; what we plead for now is a chance to understand what he was able to achieve, to hear the music of the architecture that only he could compose.

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Theater

Can't anyone here play this game?

by Donald Lyons

Broadway has in recent years taken to bunching up its openings in April and early May to qualify at the last minute for the Tony Awards and to allure the summer influx of hit-hungry tourists. Broadway thus combines the twin Hollywood habits of releasing action and juvenile movies in early summer to get the kids and of releasing serious stories in December to get Oscars. These increasingly rigid practices have much in common with the Aztec custom of ripping out the hearts of captives and virgins to please the war god Huitzilopochtli. All combine maximum to-do with maximum irrationality.

One effect of this April crowding is that the months leading up to it are barren of Broadway openings. In the last weeks, I've seen only a revival of the Fifties musical *Damn Yankees*. Musical revivals are now, of course, the staple, the *raison d'être*, the mother's milk of commercial Midtown theater. I have had kind words for the Gershwin pastiche *Crazy for You* and the current *Guys and Dolls* production. But the damn thing is out of hand. There's a dingy, bus-and-truck *My Fair Lady* already running with a succession of TV personalities as Henry Higgins. Also on the boards is Andrew Lloyd Webber's new production of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, boasting "two Sunday matinees [at 1 and 5:30] so your family can see *Joseph* and still be home by 8!" Coming up are a much-touted London "rethinking" of the Rodgers and Hammerstein *Carousel*; that Seventies piece of Fifties nostalgia, *Grease*; a sequel to *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*; a stageification of the animated musical movie *Beauty and the Beast*; and, in the fall, a Canadian "rethinking" of *Showboat* that is already being heavily advertised in print and on television. Two (rare) new musicals on the horizon are *Passion*, a new Stephen Sondheim due this spring (it's based on a 1981 Italian movie that amounted to a kooky variant on *Beauty and the Beast*), and a Lloyd Webberized *Sunset Boulevard* (from the 1950 Hollywood masterpiece) next fall.

Without prejudging any of these delights, it is safe to say that such a conglomeration does not represent a healthy state of affairs. Never, in fact, has the desperation, the lazy greed, the vulgar inanity of the Rialto been so grimly obvious as now. Broadway has become Las Vegas; it's just one tacky nostalgia-blaring lounge after another. Even in Las Vegas there remain discriminations to be made, of course. T. S. Eliot once said: "Within itself, modern literature has perfectly valid distinctions of good and bad, better and worse: and I do not wish to suggest that I confound Mr. Bernard Shaw with Mr. Noël Coward, Mrs. Woolf with Miss Mannin." Just so, the musical comedy exacts perfectly valid distinctions between, say, Gershwin and Richard Adler–Jerry Ross among old show-writers and between Stephen Sondheim and Andrew Lloyd Webber among new ones. The fact remains, though,

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that the glory days of the musical are long gone, gone with the vibrant New York culture of the three decades (from 1927, the year of *Showboat*, to 1957, the year of *West Side Story*) that gave birth to and sustained the form. The old musical was an expression of an immigrant culture that was in rich and constant cross-fertilization with much that was vital in the serious music and dance and art of its day. Even if there were a Balanchine or a Gershwin or a Duke Ellington working today, could one imagine him toiling on Broadway?

In those days, few musicals got revived. An America bursting with pep had eyes only for novelties. It is necessary not to idealize the musical comedy of yesteryear, but the temptation to do so is great today, when all is revival, revision, rethinking, subversion. It was reported, for instance, that the director of *My Fair Lady* wanted to turn the thing into a Robert Wilsonian attack on the very notion of an upper-class male remolding for the better a lower-class female but that he was restrained by his panicked producers who knew precisely what their audiences wanted and it wasn't deconstruction. The only vestige of that directorial conceit is a quick tableau which gestures toward Marcel Duchamp. The real musical comedy on Broadway today is behind the scenes.

Which brings us to *Damn Yankees*, words and music by Richard Adler and Jerry Ross, book by George Abbott and Douglass Wallop from Wallop's novel *The Year the Yankees Lost the Pennant*. It is a mediocre artifact from 1955 about a middle-aged husband who sells his soul to the devil in order to become a young baseball star and win the pennant for his beloved hometown team, the Washington Senators. I vaguely remembered the movie, or rather I remembered the premise and a couple of songs sung by a lady devil, Lola. It turns out that's all there is *to* remember, for the gimmick is never worked up into a satisfying, or even a coherent, story. The guy loves his wife and tries at the end to wiggle out of his bargain in order to return to her. He is given a maudlin ballad to croon to her, whilst the devils get the comic and campy numbers ("Whatever Lola Wants" and "Those Were the Good Old Days," both sub–Cole Porter stabs at wit). *Damn Yankees*, that is, shows an ambivalence about bourgeois versus bohemian values that was typical of the 1950s. But here the ambivalence is in no sense fertile. It is barely conscious. It is less art than sociology.

But even *Damn Yankees* does not deserve the smug condescension manifested by this production, which was originated in San Diego by director and "book revisor" Jack O'Brien. The kitchen and domestic sets are minimalist (the better to be transported cheaply around the country) and are supposed to suggest the "futurist" ovals and lopsided triangles of 1950s artiness. The costumes yell "period ugly." Celebrity ads for cigarettes and Listerine and Mercurys and Wheaties are guyed. The dialogue dwells amusedly on such words as "mambo," "Campbell's soup," "Edsel," "Roto-Rooter," and (to emphasize the unemancipatedness of women) "bridge night" and "meat loaf." (To give this devil his due, the scenes involving dancing baseball players are not only not embarrassing but show some real acquaintance with actual baseball.) And Mr. O'Brien has boldly injected into the book a few Kushnerian wisecracks at the expense of—come on, guess—yup, Joe McCarthy and J. Edgar Hoover. (The dig at Hoover's alleged homo-ness certainly gets its guffaw, but I wonder if Mr. Jack O'Brien really understands the kind of laugh he is getting here.)

That such attitudes are now the small change of the Broadway mentality is neither surprising nor even particularly interesting. It should be said, though, that the 1990s, like the three preceding decades, are in a very poor position to patronize the 1950s. No one cares what *Damn Yankees* thinks, but the attitude it embodies is widespread. Poor Broadway, so starved for new plays that it is about to revive two of the 1950s' weaker efforts, Clifford Odets's *The Flowering Peach* and William Inge's *Picnic*, can least afford to sneer at the decade that saw the premiere of *Long Day's Journey into Night*. The still-

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cohering American culture *was* then, in that prosperous, postwar time, capable of a novel like *Lolita*, of a movie like John Ford's *The Searchers*, of many New York City Ballet masterpieces, and of, I can't resist adding, magical baseball. "The repressed Fifties" belong with "the greedy Eighties" among the more disingenuously self-serving clichés of liberal propaganda.

The actual experience of *Damn Yankees* is like dinner theater without dinner. The Marquis Theatre, a characterless arena in a high-rise hotel in the "new" Times Square, is the perfect setting; the actual stage sits like a big recessed TV screen at one end of the room. Previously home to such retro disasters as *Nick and Nora* and *The Goodbye Girl*, the Marquis has found its entelechy as a revival-oriented Vegas show room. Appropriately Vegasish, too, is the overmiking of the performers, as if to wake up tired gamblers. All are loud, brassy, energetic, in your face and in your ears. They are as one-dimensional as cartoons and as touching as holograms. Bebe Neuwirth is a strictly nightclub Lola, as sexy as the check. Only Victor Garber, who plays the devil, seems to be prostituting a genuine comic gift to the demands of this tourist-theater, and I intend that as a compliment.

One antidote to Broadway is small, soberly adventurous rep companies like the Jean Cocteau and the Willow Cabin. As a rule, I report only on their successes and let pass misfires like the Cocteau's production, earlier this season, of Pirandello's *Enrico IV*. But the Willow Cabin's current *As You Like It* merits a word or two of reproof. I've loved the honest, plain way of this company with the short plays of Thornton Wilder and of Eugene O'Neill, but this stab at Shakespearean comedy gums up the works with cute conceits and corny playing. It is a transfer from their summer gig at Wolf Trap and looks it. The aesthetic inspiration seems to have been Warner Bros. in the 1930s: the bad guys sport trenchcoats and ape gangsters; a Weegee snaps pictures. Once in the forest, it's hobo-Depression time, but *The Grapes of Wrath* gets mixed up with *Li'l Abner*. Jacques looks (is this intentional?) like a ratty James Joyce. Of the performers, only the Rosalind and the Orlando rise above oafish rusticity: Fiona Davis is lanky, lovely, and charming, although she scarcely troubles to impersonate a boy; John Bolger, a Willow Cabin founder, creates a forceful, feeling, articulate Orlando worthy of a much better production.

But even these two are swamped in the circumambient busyness and cuteness. The irony is that *As You Like It* cries out for the Willow Cabin's usual signatures of simplicity and clarity. We do not need a modern level of disguise, since Shakespeare has already provided a delicately complex tissue of disguises designed to show, in the words of C. L. Barber, that "romantic participation in love and humorous detachment from its follies, the two polar attitudes which are balanced against each other in the action as a whole, meet and are reconciled in Rosalind's personality." The quicksilver alternations of mockery and seriousness, of female and male, in Rosalind and in Orlando need sweet submissiveness to Shakespeare to present. No contemporary notions of "gender" need apply. Willow Cabin's fudging, though, to do them justice, was not trendy; it was, in fact, old-fashioned in its wrongheadedness. This production also left me sadly wondering once again if *any* staging of the secondary comic characters could work today. Is Elizabethan buffoonery dead beyond theatrical recall?

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The media

Swagger & attitude

by James Bowman

Another chapter in the domestication of outrage opened as Martin Lawrence, the star of "Martin" on the Fox network and "Def Comedy Jam" on HBO, came on "Saturday Night Live" in February and delivered an obscene monologue. "Obscene," that is, by the standards of twenty or thirty years ago. Nowadays, few people outside NBC made much of a fuss about it, and NBC made a fuss because, it claimed, Lawrence had violated an understanding not to be quite so gross as in the event he was about his supposedly disgusting experiences while engaging in oral sexual relations with a variety of women. The network canceled a subsequent appearance Lawrence was to make on "The Tonight Show"—though it did so, it was careful to note, only "over Jay Leno's strenuous objections."

That way everyone was happy: Lawrence was punished for being a bad boy, so his standing went up among the other bad boys of comedy (which is almost all there is of comedy since it has become what someone has called the rock and roll of the Nineties); NBC aired a show appealing to a minority taste and still, by claiming to be outraged about it, won kudos from the (putatively) outraged majority; Jay Leno maintained his street credibility with his fellow comics by protesting against the cancellation but must have been relieved in private not to have to endure the anxiety of having on the show someone who is looking for new worlds of obscenity to conquer.

Delighting all connoisseurs of fashionable hypocrisies, Martin Lawrence issued the following statement:

> On my recent appearance on "Saturday Night Live," it was not my intent to insult anyone or single anyone out. I am not a malicious person. I am a comedian who lives to make people laugh and I enjoy finding the humor in everyday life.

The circle is completed! Martin turns out not to be a foul-mouthed lout but a nice and inoffensive guy after all. Who bothered to notice that NBC's complaint against him was never that he had singled out or insulted anyone but that some sorts of "everyday life" are not appropriate for broadcast over the public airwaves? That's just what those network people, who regularly get away with whatever provocations to propriety they think they can, have to say anyway, isn't it?

This is a nice system of sluicework to contain the flood of public indignation which might once have ruined or damaged a career, even if it didn't send the provocateur—as it once or twice thirty years ago sent Lenny Bruce—to jail. And as indignation is contained and rendered impotent, it will gradually cease to be generated. *Entertainment Weekly* went through the motions of making a drama out of the incident and pretending that Lawrence's career was in jeopardy, but even its "Can this career be saved?" box allowed Jay Leno to have the final word:

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"When Roseanne sang the national anthem in 1990 and George Bush said something negative [about her], people said, 'Her career is through.' And now she's stronger than ever. This won't hurt."

Interestingly, in the same issue, *EW* did a feature called "Is 'Saturday Night' Dead?" Some of its suggestions for improving the show were good, but the problem to which it addressed itself is really that the very shockingness and outrageousness of "Saturday Night Live"'s shocking and outrageous comedy are mostly a yawn anymore. Some weeks ago, Jason Patric was the guest host and did as his opening monologue a bit about how he doesn't really like the show and how it used to be so much better. There was the standard leaving-the-stage-to-go-talk-to-Lorne-Michaels-backstage in the middle, but the dialogue between them ("I told you I didn't like the show"/"I thought you were kidding") instead of being funny was a bit too near the mark and was greeted by the audience with nervous titters rather than its usual forced hilarity. They knew what he meant.

From Michaels's point of view, a controversy like the one over Martin Lawrence—or that occasioned by Sinead O'Connor last autumn when she tore up a picture of the Pope on the air—might at least get back some of his dwindling audience. But the wider public is becoming harder to shock, and NBC's sham indignation over *l'affaire Martin* exceeded in quantity any evidences of the real thing from the folks at home. This will be increasingly the case as the folks at home, except when they are whipped into action by some religious troglodyte with a computerized mailing list, get used to the idea that their indignation is largely effectless. The offenders may have to fill out a few forms of regret and contrition, but the offended, if they truly are offended, will most probably just tune out the shows where they are likely to meet with offensive things.

This is a pity, because people have a right to feel offended even if they haven't seen the offensive show. When long established standards of propriety or decorum are violated with impunity, the very possibility of civil discourse is eroded—even for those not present at the violation. In the same way, the increasingly strident public utterances of the buffoonish Khalid Abdul Muhammad of the Nation of Islam, though they constitute just as calculated an attempt to appear outrageous as Martin Lawrence's (see, for example, Michael Kelly's account of "Dr. Muhammad's" speech at Howard University in *The New Republic* of March 21), make their contribution to the destruction of civilized political life. The duty of being outraged at his hatemongering has largely devolved onto those who are being slandered—such as the Anti-Defamation League of the B'nai B'rith. But everyone will suffer from the effect of the slander upon the continued viability of public debate.

With the effective removal of sanctions upon offensive or indecorous behavior in public, such behavior is becoming a useful method of getting publicity. The pop cultural avant-garde—which is to say rock musicians and stand-up comics—have clearly got the idea. One Mr. Bono, of the band U2, demonstrated this truism on the live broadcast of the Grammy awards at the beginning of March. In accepting an award for the best "alternative" album, he delivered "a message to the young people of America" (Mr. Bono is Irish) that "we shall continue to abuse our position and f*** the mainstream." To this provocation, the starstruck Michael Greene, president of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences, replied: "Bono is rock 'n' roll, and rock 'n' roll is the voice of rebellion; and it's live television. Get over it."

This is a view with which Bono himself evidently finds himself in concurrence. Already forgiven for his four-letter word, he was called back to the stage later in the evening to present an award to Frank Sinatra. "Rock 'n' roll people love Frank," he said. "He has what we want: swagger and attitude. He's big on attitude, serious on attitude. *Bad* attitude. Frank's the Chairman of the Bad . . ." The crowd cheered lustily and Flattered Frank responded: "That's the

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best welcome I ever had." He was visibly moved. So moved, in fact, that one of his handlers asked the network to cut away in the middle of his acceptance to a commercial. "They felt he would have talked for about an hour," said Mr. Greene.

Some Sinatra admirers were upset by this. Shortly after the incident another pop star, Mr. Billy Joel, interrupted his own performance to look at his watch and say: "Valuable advertising time going by; valuable advertising time going by. Dollars, dollars, dollars." Of course no one has yet noticed Mr. Joel declining to accept the dollars, dollars, dollars that accrue to his own performances, but a "bad" attitude about money is just as fashionable and just as empty of substance as Bono's distinctly non-terrifying defiance of the mainstream or any of the other bad attitudes on show here.

But Bono was right about Sinatra's jazz-era swagger. There can be no doubt, I think, that as a vocal stylist in popular music, he had real greatness. If it was ever possible to believe that the products of Tin Pan Alley bore comparison with those of Schubert and Schumann and Brahms and Richard Strauss, it was when Sinatra's nuances of tone and inflections of phrasing added unexpected depth and subtlety to songs that we thought we knew only as musical trivialities. But what rock musicians admire about Frank Sinatra, we were told by a rock musician, is not his musicianship but his *attitude*—his *bad* attitude, which is to say a tough-talking, foul-mouthed, boorish, loutish, ill-mannered attitude. And Sinatra appeared to agree with him.

"Bad," of course, in the street argot that these musicians emulate, is a term of approbation which may be taken as an abbreviation of "bad attitude" as a high-school principal or a football coach or a scoutmaster might use the term. Since the teen rebels which give "bad" its vogue may be presumed not to like genuine evil—lying, treachery, greed, and so on, or violence and thievery within the circle of intimacy circumscribed by their own gang or neighborhood—any better than most of us do, their exaltation of "bad" behavior is really all about appearances. Adopting an "attitude" means *looking* bad or "dangerous" (another vogue word and the title of an album by Michael Jackson, the prince of poses); it means striking the right posture and saying the right words and wearing the right clothes and listening to the right music.

In other words, it is a style of *performance*—a performance designed to titillate its audience with the whiff of that "reality" which their comfortable and well-insulated lives have prepared them to believe lies exclusively, or at least electrically, in the violent, the sordid, the sexual, the criminal. In her fascinating new book, *Hole in Our Soul: The Loss of Beauty and Meaning in American Popular Music* (Free Press), Martha Bayles traces this thread in popular culture back to what she calls "perverse modernism" (for example, Rimbaud, Marinetti, the Dadaists) in the high culture. Their nihilistic iconoclasm, born of the same desire to shock that we see in Bad Bono, infected the world of popular music in the 1950s, she claims, and has chronically afflicted it ever since.

But I wonder if Miss Bayles does not have too romantic a view of the native goodness and open-heartedness of the black culture out of which the popular arts in America spring. There is no doubt that the jazz culture and certain strains of modernism influenced one another a great deal, but it is not necessary to posit corruption from an extreme of European decadence to explain what happened to American popular music. The roots of the fashionably bad attitude go deep into black culture itself, which—first through jazz, then through rock, and now through rap—has always been the final arbiter of what constitutes "cool." This is the more inclusive term for the approved attitude, speech, or behavior, "bad" being a subcategory of cool.

And jazz and rock and rap all have in common an emphasis on posture as something more or less disconnected from the moral realities which it apes. It is cool to

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carry a gun; it is not cool, except in certain very restricted social settings, or in a movie or music video, to use it. All three of these successive cultural hegemonies have had their origins in the larger black culture of which they have been important parts, and the black culture assumed the shape that it did because of its history of oppression. As slaves, or as readily identifiable underlings to the dominant white culture, blacks could afford nothing more than posturing. It was all very well to swagger on a Saturday night in the quarters or the ghettoes of northern cities, but you still had to be at work on Monday morning looking suitably submissive and humble and compliant under the stern eye of the white man boss.

Black culture's natural exuberance and penchant for hyperbole, which went against the grain of the native tendency of English to understatement, was thus reinforced by the political reality in the midst of which it developed for centuries. The tough-talking, foul-mouthed, self-regarding, ostentatious swaggerer, perhaps dressed in a zoot suit and sporting gaudy jewelry, became a fixture of black culture in the absence of the system of honor which was characteristic of those who actually wielded the power. Honor of some sort was necessary in the dominant culture as a means of establishing a connection between word and deed, between pose and action. That is how things get done and the world is ruled. To be a man of honor, a man of your word, was to eschew posturing and to expect others to present themselves as they really were instead of putting on a show, whether of "bad"-ness or of goodness.

For centuries, non-men (women and children), like non-whites, were largely exempted from the demands of honor because they were supposed incapable of it, but there is no obvious reason why such patronizing assumptions might not have changed eventually, at least in relation to black men. But America made two big cultural mistakes in the 1950s. First, in its enthusiasm for youth, it handed the culture over to the immature. Grown rich beyond all previous imaginings, it chose to bestow its riches on the young, who were exempted both from work and from any real attempt at education and were afforded the leisure which is the soil in which all culture grows. Increasingly, "youth culture" became synonymous with American culture.

Second, as Miss Bayles would argue, it adopted as its own the high culture's swoon, in the aftermath of World War I: its belief in the fraud of honor and the related assumption that "reality" was what everything pleasant or beautiful or virtuous or of good repute disguised. Suddenly the swaggering blacks, whose long exemption from the larger culture's requirements of honor had taught to strut and who had a genuine tale of oppression and suffering to tell, became the dominant fashion influence on white youth, which they have remained ever since. From the time that Jack Kerouac, in *On the Road*, set out to shock his elders by wishing to be black, "cool" has remained unchallenged as the standard to which the young have aspired—so that now, of course, it is the standard to which nearly everyone under sixty aspires.

This was as bad for black as it was for white culture, because it flattered the very things about the former which were preventing its assimilation into the latter. Thus it exaggerated its own "bad" attributes, which brought it even more approval, and so on in a vicious circle. But once it got to a certain point of exaggeration, it became cool precisely *because* it was fake. That "cheesiness" of bad attitude as an obvious form of self-parody—in the case, say, of Michael Jackson—was just what appealed to the "postmodern" generation: the more fake the better. This glorying in fakery may derive from the influence of camp, as the gay subculture has risen to prominence alongside the black in defining what cool is. For what is now cool has more to do with sexual, social, and artistic sophistication than ever before.

So much so, in fact, that the poor old popular culture out of which the very idea of cool sprang is in danger of being left, pant-

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ing, behind it. This was the theme of the notorious episode of "Roseanne" which aired on the same night as the Grammy awards, the episode of the lesbian kiss that ABC is reported to have tried to ban and then to have engaged in some tough negotiations with Roseanne Arnold about before it was allowed to be shown. As it happens, the lesbian kiss as a televisual image turned out to be irrelevant. The episode could easily have done without it. But, like Bono's saying "fuck," it generated the necessary publicity. Those who tuned in to watch it could see nothing but the back of Mariel Hemingway's head—followed by fifteen minutes of some of the funniest and most sharply observed comedy of manners you are likely ever to see on television.

Roseanne's character finds herself in a desperate debate with the lesbian Nancy, played by Sandra Bernhard, as to whether or not she remains genuinely cool. Roseanne insists that in spite of her embarrassment and distaste at a homosexual experience, she remains as tolerant and even appreciative of the gay life as coolness requires one to be. But Nancy crows over the fact that her friend's obvious discomfort has been a serious blow to her pretension of coolness —which, of course, is itself a pretension. The subtleties and nuances of the satire in this discussion were often not picked up by the studio audience, which in these kinds of shows seems always to laugh with the synchronicity and predictability of a laugh track. But it was nice to think that here and there across America there must have been a few discerning souls who picked it up.

Nancy, with absolute confidence in her own psychological acuity, tells Roseanne that her discomfort on being kissed was owing to the fact that she was "afraid that just one little tiny percent of you might have been turned on by a woman."

ROSEANNE: That is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard! I am not afraid of any small percentage of my gayness inside, you know what I mean? I am totally O.K. about whether I'm, like, three percent or four percent or—lower.

NANCY: This is exactly why I didn't want to invite you in the first place, Roseanne: because you are a total hypocrite!

ROSEANNE: I am *not* a hypocrite! A hypocrite doesn't go to a gay bar and teach forty gay people how to do the monkey!

NANCY: Oh! And we're supposed to admire you because you went to a gay bar? I'm supposed to think you're cool because you have gay friends?

ROSEANNE: I don't care if *you* think I'm cool at all, because I *know* that I am cool, baby. I'm probably the coolest chick you've ever met. And, for your information, I have friends that are *way* gayer than you.

Here "Roseanne" presents us, as it does so often at its best, with a dynamic tension between the liberal pieties to which people of Roseanne's generation automatically subscribe and their own moral, not to say visceral, instincts. The same thing is at work in the scene which immediately follows between Dan (John Goodman), Roseanne's husband, and their son, D.J. Dan is trying to read the newspaper when a troubled D.J. tells him that his mother was out dancing with women last night. "Isn't that wrong?" he asks.

DAN: No, son, it's perfectly fine, and anyone who tries to tell you different is wrong.

D.J.: [*After a pause*] Does that mean you dance with other men?

DAN: [*After a very long pause*] Yes I do.

D.J.: Really?

DAN: No! Never! Not once!

D.J.: Well, I don't want to.

DAN: [*After a pause*] That's your choice. [*D.J. exits;* DAN *pauses again, then, to himself*] Hallelujah!

This kind of thing is not anti-gay; it is merely an accurate reflection of the kinds of hypocrisies on the subject of homosexuality which afflict most liberal-minded heterosexuals with families. Given that Mrs. Arnold is, in effect, sending herself up on the

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show, it would have been more becoming if she had been a little less self-righteous about it off-camera—especially as both she and her husband, Tom Arnold, ended up sounding very much like the character she plays. Arnold at one point said that the episode was about helping people to "accept" homosexuality and then, fearing that he might be misunderstood, hastily added "not for themselves!" and then, realizing that he was digging himself in deeper, added something lame about living and letting live.

It was a comic reprise of the situation that Roseanne gets herself into on the show when she is goaded by the teasing of her sister Jackie (Laurie Metcalf) into screeching I AM NOT GAY! just as Nancy walks into the room, then tries to apologize:

> I didn't mean for that to sound like it was *bad* or anything. Because if I *was* gay it would be just fine, but I'm not gay. So I just don't like people calling me things that I'm not, like a hypocrite, or a gay, you know, because. . . I'm not. And I wouldn't like anybody to call me, like, um . . . [*pause*] . . . an astronaut, because it's fine to be an astronaut, but, see, I'm not an astronaut. So . . . [*Pause.* NANCY *remains silent. Audience laughter.* ROSEANNE *realizes her own absurdity.*] I'm not going to admit I'm wrong or anything, but I just don't want to fight with you anymore, so . . . I was wrong.
>
> NANCY: Thank you!
>
> ROSEANNE: [*After another pause*] I'm still pretty cool, you know, for a forty-one-year-old mother of three that lives in Landford, Illinois. I like that Snoopy Dog Dog . . .

In her own terms, or those of the character she plays, the terrible dilemma facing Roseanne is that she is seemingly forced to choose between acknowledging that she is gay or else that she is uncool. There is an underlying guilt about heterosexuality because it seems inconsistent to her with the coolness that is an essential attribute of her self-image. That is the subtext for Roseanne Connor, the character, but the subtext for Roseanne Arnold, her creator, is that there is something essentially absurd about this aspiration to coolness—hence the confusion of the name of the *bad* rapper, Snoop Doggy Dogg (currently under indictment for murder—a rare case of a countercultural hero taking his own rhetoric seriously), with that of the quintessentially WASPish Snoopy, Charles Schulz's cartoon beagle who has not been hip (or funny) for twenty-five years. It is a small comfort but a real one, I think, that there are those on television like Mrs. Arnold who are still genuine enough to laugh (occasionally) at the fantastical prop room of the "cool" culture—and thus at themselves.

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Books

The genius of capitalism

by David Frum

During the writing of his biography of Mountbatten, Philip Ziegler posted a little reminder to himself above his desk: "Despite everything, he was a great man." Unfortunately for the anecdote, in Mountbatten's case the reminder was untrue. It would have made for a much better story had the note been written by Lord Robert Skidelsky to guide him as he chronicled the life of John Maynard Keynes.[1]

Keynes was one of the most influential thinkers of our century, and his influence has been almost entirely bad. Since time immemorial, governments have debased their currency, misappropriated their people's wealth, and diverted the proceeds from productive investment to garish monuments to themselves. It was Keynes who supplied governments with arguments—and since Keynes was Keynes, brilliant arguments—to *justify* this outrageous conduct. If John Maynard Keynes had never lived, the Western world might still be the overtaxed, inflationary, statist mess that it is, but at least the people responsible for the mess would have to pretend to be embarrassed about it.

Instead, Keynes's fertile and subtle mind manufactured a huge armory of clever defenses of bad public policy. Since the publication of his 1936 masterwork, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*, opponents of profligacy in government and state manipulation of the economy have had to contend not merely with the usual selfishness and cowardice of politicians but also with the subversive power of Keynes's mordant and glittering mind.

Keynes did for economics what Nietzsche did for morals: he demonstrated that the absolute moral truths that earlier generations believed in were merely intellectual constructs, and constructs that could do with a great deal of improvement. Pre-Keynesian economics saw economies as naturally self-adjusting. Whatever dislocations and disturbances might flare up from time to time, over the long run an economy would perform as well as the skill, effort, and accumulated capital of the community permitted. This was the complacent theorem that provoked Keynes's famous jeer that "in the long run we are all dead."

Keynes argued that economies could underperform their potential for worryingly long periods of time, and that their tendency toward underperformance had grown worse since 1914. The problem was money: in the frightening postwar world, wealth-owners too often held their wealth in cash, handy in case of emergency. According to pre-Keynesian orthodoxy, this was no problem: if the owners of wealth did not invest it, the

1 Robert Skidelsky's *John Maynard Keynes* is a biography-in-progress. So far, two of a projected three volumes have appeared: *Hopes Betrayed, 1883–1920* (1983) is now available as a Penguin paperback (447 pages, $15.95), and *The Economist as Savior, 1920–1937* (1992) is just out in the U.S. from Allen Lane/The Penguin Press (731 pages, $37.50).

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banks in which they stored it would lend to someone who would. If large numbers of wealth-owners succumbed to the jitters, the amount of cash in banks would grow; with cash plentiful, interest rates would fall; and falling interest rates would encourage entrepreneurs to borrow and get the economy moving again. Keynes argued that this happy cycle need not occur—at any rate, it could not always be relied on to occur. A pound saved was, he contended, not automatically and by necessity a pound invested; it was potentially a pound stolen from productive purposes, a pound buried in the dark and denied to those who could put it to use.

Keynes prescribed two principal policies to set capital to work in a stagnant economy. First, interest rates must as a general rule be kept low, so as to minimize the temptation to hoard. (The "euthanasia of the rentier.") Second, governments must be prepared to invest directly in the economy to make up for the faintheartedness of private businessmen. Keynes astutely foresaw that cheap money and lavish government expenditure could lead to trouble—inflation, depreciation of the currency, and so on. He was more than willing to sanction extraordinary interventions in economic life, including protective tariffs, in order to head those troubles off.

Some of the more conservative admirers of Keynes—dazzled by his vaulting imagination, his many valid insights, and his gorgeous literary style—have tried to salvage him for the cause of sound economics by insisting that his "general theory" was not really general at all. It was a *special* theory, adapted to the peculiar situation of Britain in the sluggish 1920s and grim 1930s. Just as Einstein conceded that Newtonian physics worked pretty well most of the time, only needing the help of the theory of relativity at very high speeds, so too, say conservative Keynesians, did Keynes accept the validity of classical market economics under normal conditions. But that's not how Keynes himself saw things, according to Skidelsky. Keynes was a temperamental radical, who relished the thought that he had overturned and rendered obsolete the entire existing structure of economics.

Skidelsky's first volume documented Keynes's animosity to the Victorian order of things, not just in economics but in all aspects of life. Keynes never escaped the self-congratulatory world of Bloomsbury—a sanctuary from which Edwardian aesthetes, emancipated women, and homosexuals poured condescending scorn on the philistinism and stupidity they perceived to surround them. Skidelsky plainly finds Bloomsbury a great deal less appealing than its zillions of contemporary chroniclers, and in both volumes of the biography he approvingly quotes Keynes's 1938 lecture "My Early Beliefs" as proof that the economist outgrew the callow ideas of the Cambridge Apostles and Gordon Square. "In retrospect," Skidelsky wrote in Volume I,

> Keynes felt that "his early beliefs" had brought him both gain and loss. The gain was that "we were amongst the first of our generation, perhaps alone amongst our generation[,] to escape from Benthamite tradition," with its "over-valuation of the economic criterion." This had protected "the whole lot of us from the final *reductio ad absurdum* of Benthamism known as Marxism." The loss lay in a "disastrously mistaken" view of human nature. He and his friends, repudiating original sin, had believed that human beings were sufficiently rational to be "released from . . . inflexible rules of conduct, and left, from now onwards, to their own . . . reliable intuitions of the good." This view ignored the fact that "civilisation was a thin and precarious crust erected by the personality and will of the few, and only maintained by rules and conventions skillfully put across and guilefully preserved."

Unfortunately, it's not clear that Keynes fully lived up to this more mature point of view. He went to his death caring more for the good opinion of Vanessa Bell and Lytton Strachey than that of anyone other than (just possibly) his wife. To the end he was a scoff-

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er and a sneerer. Skidelsky does not deny this aspect of Keynes's personality, but he offers the ingenious defense that Keynes "was not, after all, improbably cast as 'the savior of capitalism.' Social systems are never saved by true believers, the virtues appropriate to going down with the ship rarely being suitable for the arts of navigation."

Of course, in one of history's too-obvious ironies, Keynesianism in due time evolved into a social system as calcified as Victorian capitalism, and Keynes's intellectual legacy came to be defended by true believers every bit as willing to go down with the ship as the hardfaced mid-nineteenth-century disciples of David Ricardo. Without being too fanciful, one can even say that Skidelsky's two volumes about Keynes eerily parallel Keynes's own writings. Keynes first important work, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, was published in 1920, while the world made by nineteenth-century capitalism lay shattered by the catastrophe of the First World War but before men's minds had yet caught up. When Skidelsky's first volume was published in 1983, the world made by Keynesian demand management and artificially cheap money was likewise a wreck, the victim of stagflation and the near-meltdown of the world banking system in August 1982. By the time Keynes's *General Theory* was put out, nineteenth-century economics was as defunct intellectually as it had been practically sixteen years before. And equally, as Skidelsky's second volume appears in the post–Berlin Wall era, Keynesianism has not only stopped working, it is nearly universally seen to have stopped working. The scoffer and sneerer is himself now scoffed at and sneered at.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about Skidelsky's biography—and it's packed with interesting things—is the way the author grapples with this movement of economic thought away from Keynes. The entry for Hayek in the index of Volume II is twice as long as the entry for Marx. It is the right-wing criticisms of Keynes that Skidelsky anticipates and attempts to answer. He is at pains to show that Keynes did indeed appreciate the dangers of inflation, that he welcomed entrepreneurship, that he opposed excessive taxation, and that he attached virtually no value to equality as an end in itself. As Skidelsky tells it, Keynes may have disliked Britain's particular inequalities, which put a decadent landed class at the top, but he emphatically did not want to level individuals. In a particularly pungent mood Keynes declared, "I do not want to antagonize the successful, the exceptional. I believe that man for man the middle class and even the upper class is very much superior to the working class." At times, Skidelsky's Keynes sounds oddly like a contemporary neoconservative: if the economy of postwar Europe stuttered and stammered, it was—Skidelsky's Keynes perceives—because the virtues that had made the nineteenth-century economy work had been blasted out of existence in 1914–18. Skidelsky's Keynes believes that the Victorian economy worked not because it complied with the laws of economics but because Victorian personalities made it work. Post-Victorian personalities, which Skidelsky's Keynes finds rather less admirable than some other Keyneses, had lost their forefathers' virtues and needed a new kind of economy—a more authoritarian economy, one that allowed weaker characters less scope. Skidelsky quotes from Virginia Woolf's diaries an account of a dinner in honor of T. S. Eliot in 1934. "I begin to see," Keynes said to Woolf, "that our generation—yours & mine . . . owed a great deal to our father's religion. And the young, like Julian [the son of her sister Vanessa Bell], who are brought up without it, will never get so much out of life. They're trivial: like dogs in their lusts."

For all its eloquence and impressive textual authority, for all its generous willingness to take seriously critics of Keynes whom Keynesians laughed at until little more than a decade ago, Skidelsky's attempted rescue of Keynes's economics founders on the single greatest practical deficiency of Keynesian policy: its blind faith in the wisdom, justice, and competence of civil servants. At some

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deep level, Keynes seems to have divided the world into two groups: people like himself and his Cambridge friends—intelligent, aesthetically sensitive, imbued with advanced opinions—and people like the despised "hearties" of his undergraduate days—athletic, stolid, conventional. In his mind, the first group was more naturally attracted to government, the second to business. And he had no doubt as to which group was more to be trusted. As scathing and funny as he could be about the investment decisions that businessmen might make with their own wealth, it never occurred to him to ponder with equal skepticism what clever art-loving grown-up undergraduates might do with other people's wealth once put in charge of a state program of house- and road-building.

At some level, this great man—a man who dedicated himself to ruthless truth-telling, no matter what the consequences; a man who put workability and the evidence of experience at the very center of his personal thought—can fairly be convicted of the error that would have appalled him most: naïveté. Damningly, his naïveté was born not out of ignorance or gullibility but out of vanity. He was naïve about government, and the risk of governmental error, because he expected that the upper reaches of government would be staffed by men rather like himself, in sensibility if not in genius. Skidelsky calls Keynes the last of the great English liberals. In at least one sense, the accolade—if it is an accolade—is well deserved. Despite the condemnation of precisely this sort of error in "My Early Beliefs," Keynes could never shake himself free of the prejudice that the world was governed by more or less reasonable chaps, and that no part of the world was more likely to be governed by reasonable chaps than one's nation's enemies.

As a senior Treasury official in the First World War, Keynes was an important organizer of British survival and the eventual Allied victory. But all through the war he held fast to the pacifist dogma that the military rulers of Germany wanted a compromise peace every bit as much as Bloomsbury did. "Indeed," Skidelsky comments sadly, "a gross overestimate of the strength of the German moderates, as well as a misunderstanding of their aims, was characteristic of the whole British middle-class peace movement." They projected their own image upon a hostile and dangerous world. If not naïveté, this was at least narcissism—an involvement with oneself so all-consuming that one could not absorb the information that other people held radically different opinions and behaved in entirely different ways. It is this weakness, more than any other trait of Keynes's, that convinces the reader of this biography that, had Keynes somehow survived to a riper age, he would not, no matter what his more conservative admirers claim, ever have migrated rightward. A liberal Keynes was, a liberal he would have remained.

But give him credit for this: Keynes showed no such naïveté in the 1930s. He grasped the Nazi menace from the start, and shot the Labour Party's arguments to pieces when it adopted fear of fiscal deficits as a reason to oppose British re-armament. Nor, aside from a brief flurry of over-optimism about the prospects for relatively rapid economic growth in Russia as a result of a visit there in 1925, was Keynes ever seduced by Communism. "Marxist socialism," he wrote in 1924, "must always remain a portent to the historians of opinion—how a doctrine so illogical and so dull can have exercised so powerful and enduring influence over the minds of men and, through them, the course of history." A decade later, he was warning Cambridge undergraduates that Marxism stood far below social credit as economic quackery, and mischievously wrote to George Bernard Shaw:

> My feelings about *Das Kapital* are the same as my feelings about the *Koran*. I know that it is historically important and I know that many people, not all of whom are idiots, find it a sort of Rock of Ages and containing inspiration. Yet when I look into it, it is to me inexplicable that it can have this effect. Its dreary, out-of-date, academic controversialising seems so

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> extraordinarily unsuitable as material for the purpose . . . How could either of these books carry fire and sword round half the world? It beats me.

Despite his mockery, Keynes well understood the attractions of Communism to the affluent young. "When Cambridge undergraduates take their inevitable trip to Bolshiedom, are they disillusioned when they find it all dreadfully uncomfortable? Of course not. That is what they are looking for." In his liberal way, however, he found the conversion to Marxism comical rather than horrifying.

As Keynes's funny but deadly animadversions on Marxism suggest, much of the impact of his ideas originated in his remarkable personal charm. In a small society like that of interwar England, personality counted. And Keynes's was evidently delightful. He treated his Bloomsbury friends with extraordinary generosity, generosity that was seldom returned. Cambridge followed his ideas at least in part because it liked him so much. It makes one wonder whether the course of modern economic life would have been different had Ludwig von Mises not been such a pedantic and irascible old man, or if Hayek had been quicker with a joke.

To Skidelsky's credit, much of Keynes's charm is captured on the page, which one would think would be an almost impossible task. But then, Skidelsky accomplishes one impossible task right after another. His biography combines the telling of Keynes's fascinating life with penetrating and surprisingly accessible analysis of his economic ideas, of his times, of the philosophy from which Keynes's own work proceeded. (More technical discussions are appended to the ends of the appropriate chapters.) Along the way, Skidelsky pauses for some illuminating reflection on the biographer's historiography.

> An inescapable conundrum of biography is to know what allowance to make for the *Zeitgeist* in directing one's subject's thought and life. People are children of their times, as well as of their parents. . . . But the implicit biographical assumption is that for most explanatory purposes, the *Zeitgeist* can be held constant; that it changes more slowly than the individual life; and that, therefore, family, education and class are the main systematic external influences the biographer needs to consider. . . . The assumption . . . is that biographical subjects are much more frequently products of their *backgrounds* than of their *times*.

In Keynes's case at least, Skidelsky maintains, the usual assumption is wrong.

Altogether, this is a very successful biography. Is it too long? Biographies nowadays nearly always are. I sometimes wonder whether excessively long biographies are not a side effect of the decline of public sculpture. The Victorians gave their heroes statues; we don't know how to do that anymore, and so we build our monuments in bookshop windows. But long as it is, this is a book worth the time it consumes. The reader who works his way through it will emerge with a keener understanding not just of Keynes's time, but of his own.

Real powers

Saul Bellow It All Adds Up:
From the Dim Past
to the Uncertain Future.
Viking, 327 pages, $23.95

reviewed by Sam Tanenhaus

Saul Bellow's first nonfiction anthology is not a "reliquary," the author says in a preface, abjuring sainthood, but simply a "gathering of some of the more readable essays" he has produced over the years. Given the guiltless recyclings of so many of his contemporaries, the disclaimer sounds archaic, as does his apology for having written on occasion for money. But then Bellow has always held himself to a high standard, and been held to one by others, though today few remember the time when, as Norman

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Podhoretz once wrote, "the validity of a whole phase of American experience was felt to hang on the question of whether or not [Bellow] would turn out to be a great novelist." His scramble up Parnassus has been accomplished with the Williamsburg Bridge strapped to his back. A writer so burdened may be forgiven for admonishing us that his warmed-up leftovers do not amount to sacred remains.

What they do amount to is a summing-up. The varied topics Bellow bestows his gifts on lead us windingly through the many passages of his long life. There are vivid evocations of Depression Chicago, the city he owns as Dreiser once owned it, and textured glimpses of Europe in the late 1940s, when Bellow briefly lived there. The oldest piece is among the best—a "Spanish Letter" (1948) that includes an account of a political trial reported by the thirty-three-year-old Bellow in a manner already characteristic: "To see [the accused] play the soldierly game and stand like *hombres honrados* to verify confessions extracted, everyone knows, in the cellars of the Seguridad affects me painfully, like the injection of a depressant that thickens the heartbeat." Bellow's postwar Paris, retrieved in startling detail in 1983, is no less dispiriting, "a sullen, grumbling, drizzling city [that] still remembered the humiliations of occupation." There are also stinging bulletins from the home front. Since the austere *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970), Bellow's disillusionment with America has been a dominant chord in his steadily darkening music. *It All Adds Up* deplores "the disappearance of a genial street life from American cities; the dank and depressing odors of cultural mildew rising from the giant suburbs, which continue to grow; the shift of bohemia from the slums to the universities."

Bellow has often said that the buoyant picaresque of *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953) gave him his authentic voice. The autobiographical vistas opened up in *It All Adds Up* imply that his first novel, the moodier, narrower *Dangling Man* (1944), with its boarding-house pall, comes closer to his lived experience. There is not much humor in the personal essays of this writer renowned for his comic effects. The elderly Bellow, summoning up his apprentice days in the third person, has not forgotten "an unwelcome singularity [that] made his heart ache. He was, so far as he knew, the only full-time *romancier* in Chicago (apart from Nelson Algren), and he felt the queerness (sometimes he thought it the *amputation*) of his condition."

The queerness was drubbed into him by Chicago itself, little changed in the Thirties from the greedy, grabby Big Town of Dreiser and Upton Sinclair. The young Bellow, scribbling in his rented room, as isolated as Melville, felt physically pressed in upon by "the steelmaking dinosaurs just to the south, and the stockyards, the slaughter rooms blazing with aerated blood where Croat or Negro workers sloshed in rubber boots, right at your back, and the great farm-machinery works and the automobile assembly lines and mail order houses, and the endless railyards and the gloomy Roman pillars of the downtown banks." Chicago was a "powerful place, but the power was something felt, not shared." To be a writer there was to be "out of line," a "strange deviant."

But solitude confers strength on the artist. It magnifies the scale of his labors. His struggle to create becomes its own drama, or farce, or both. The two are not easily distinguished. In Bellow's universe, buffoons are deadly serious, no less so than in real life. In a brilliant essay, "Literary Notes on Khrushchev" (1961), written at the time of the premier's visit to the United States, Bellow observes with amazement Khrushchev's "brutal and angry comedy"—the low antics and threatening boasts ("We will bury you!") mixed in with ideological pieties—and then realizes that this crude despot, master of an enslaved people, has granted himself "the privilege of direct emotional self-expression, . . . not a privilege exercised by many people in the West, so far as I can see." Without remorse, Khrushchev will

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"suck into himself all the resources of creativity and leave the art of his country impoverished."

The performance fascinates Bellow, I suspect, because it parodies his own as a Romantic artist who also absorbs the whole of reality into himself, though his objective is to replenish and not deplete. Blake and Wordsworth, whom Bellow praises and quotes, hoped to rejuvenate through imaginative works a culture they feared was *in extremis*. Bellow does too and is not ashamed to say so. His character Herzog's unmailed letters to General Eisenhower are not offered wholly to our derision. Bellow too yearns to lecture potentates, to brief them on Hegel and humble them with trenchant lines from the *Songs of Experience*.

He also wants to instill in us a reverent mysticism. *It All Adds Up* opens with a lecture on Mozart first delivered in 1991 in Florence. Bellow's subject is the composer's genius and the unassailable proof it offers that some things defy explanation. There is no way to account rationally for Mozart's gift, to explain how it could "appear so early and develop so swiftly and be so complete." It exists as something supernatural and possibly divine, "a profound originality coming from God knows what source." Mozart's prodigality is not just something to wonder at or take pleasure in. It rebukes "the earthbound psychology that rules our minds in this century."

Psychology is one of the many "doctrines" and "ideologies" Bellow is fed up with. He also rails at the depredations of "functionaries in business, government, and the professions," at the false knowledge imparted by "putty-headed academics and intellectuals," and at the "artificial euphorias" induced by "managers and manipulators." Against these, Bellow invokes our "real powers," which "seem to derive from the universe itself," and he extols "certain essences permanently associated with human life" and "restored to our consciousness by persons who are described as artists."

All this sounds cranky but isn't. Bellow's mysticism is rooted in his concrete perception that while the imaginative artist is necessarily a "strange deviant," he is not stranger, really, than anyone else. We are all mysterious to one another. This theme irradiates all Bellow's writing, going back half a century to *Dangling Man*. Joseph, the Kafka-derived diarist, vents a need to "talk to myself" about "serious matters" which others—his wife, family, and friends—are too busy to attend to, involved as they are in making practical plans. Joseph admits he is an odd duck. "But that can't be helped. The appearance and behavior of reflective men is seldom comparable to the less reflective, who unhesitatingly entrust all they stand for to their looks and gestures." Besides, "there is an element of the comic or fantastic in everyone. You can never bring that altogether under control."

Those last two sentences are what lift Bellow out of the pit of personal grievance. The not quite controllable world he absorbs into himself bristles with primitive energy; even the most brutish of his characters—the thugs and madmen—express themselves with Khrushchev-sized exaltation. Bellow's most conspicuous talent is for physical descriptions whose elaborations serve the replenishing ends of myth—his bodies and faces are "comic or fantastic" and yet are imbued with "certain essences permanently associated with human life."

It All Adds Up shows us how freely Bellow pursues archetypes, even at the expense of accuracy. A favorite target is Edmund Wilson, whom we first see lumbering into Hyde Park, "shining with sweat and bristling at his ears and nostrils with red hairs," and find twenty-five years later at the Kennedy White House, harrumphing about American imperialism "in the tones of Mr. Magoo." Still later we are told that the great critic

> wouldn't read his contemporaries at all. He stopped with Eliot and Hemingway. The rest he dismissed. This lack of goodwill, to put it at its mildest, was much admired by his fans. That fact speaks for itself. Curious about

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> Canadians, Indians, Haitians, Russians, studying Marxism and the Dead Sea scrolls, he was the Protestant majority's big literary figure. I have sometimes thought that he was challenged by Marxism or modernism in the same way that I have seen the descendants of Orthodox Jews challenged by oysters. A man like Wilson could have done much to strengthen literary culture, but he dismissed all that, he would have nothing to do with it.

This is idiosyncratic, to put it most mildly. Wilson's luminous pages on Proust and his novelistic inhabitings of Marx and Lenin are emphatically not the work of a writer queasily tasting forbidden treats. And while Wilson was incurably a man of the 1920s, baffled by much that came later, he did not stop with Eliot and Hemingway. He grappled with Katherine Anne Porter, Kay Boyle, Glenway Wescott, John O'Hara, John Steinbeck, Nathanael West. He also praised Bellow's first novel, *Dangling Man*, though was silent, I believe, on the others. Is *that* the problem? No matter. The point is, Bellow knows better. In a calmer moment, he credits Wilson with "open[ing] my eyes to the high culture of modern Europe." But the author of *Axel's Castle* is less vivid to Bellow than his own invention, the Mr. Magoo of Protestant letters.

This is the dark side of Bellow's genius for enlargement, akin to his massive fury. He remains a capacious spirit who sees great distances in many directions. His querulousness has lately earned him the label "conservative." It seems more accurate to say he belongs to the last generation of Americans who came of age believing the nation itself was young, its history still to be written, and who have since felt its possibilities dwindle. Bellow is more distraught than others because he saw it coming, and long ago. There is a remarkable moment in his "Spanish Letter," when, thoroughly exasperated by the Old World cynicism he keeps meeting, Bellow wonders if the fault is his. He appraises himself through the alien eyes of his hosts. What do the weary, ravaged Spaniards see when they look at him? An invader, one "of the new lords of the earth, a new Roman, full of the pride of machines and dollars." This is not a conservative or a liberal. It is a visionary. And when a visionary peers into the "uncertain future" and discerns only a void, we had better take heed.

Understanding Arendt

Hannah Arendt
Essays in Understanding 1930–1954.
Edited by Jerome Kohn.
Harcourt Brace, 496 pages, $39.95

reviewed by Jenny Teichman

This collection, the first of two that will gather Hannah Arendt's fugitive writings, contains forty papers, most but not all of which have been published before, some in German magazines, and some in English-language journals such as *Commentary*, *Partisan Review*, and *The Commonweal*. Its contents are very various. There are several book reviews, half a dozen essays on philosophy (or rather, on philosophers), some pieces on religion, a dedicatory letter to Karl Jaspers, an essay about Kafka, and two or three items containing material destined to form part of what is perhaps Hannah Arendt's most important work, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). The more significant essays, however, in my view, are those about Nazism. There are eleven or twelve of these, and it can be seen from their titles that they must have formed the basis of much of what Arendt later wrote in her very well-known, her almost notorious, book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963). The titles include "Approaches to the German Problem," "Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility," "Nightmare and Flight," "The Seeds of a Fascist International," "The Image of Hell," "The Study of Concentration Camps," "The Aftermath of Nazi Rule," "At Table with Hitler," "Understanding and Politics," "Mankind and Terror," and "The Eggs Speak Up" (i.e., the eggs which make the omelette).

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The collection begins with an interview given by Miss Arendt to Günter Gaus, a German journalist, in 1964, then switches back to 1930 and her first known publication, a three-page article about St. Augustine. After that the contents are ordered chronologically.

There is little to be said about the book reviews. Book reviews are for the most part as lasting or as ephemeral as the works reviewed, and I fear that those in this volume are probably only of interest to the archivists and to Arendt's devoted editor.

As to the philosophical essays, note that in 1964 Hannah Arendt said to her interviewer: "I do not belong to the circle of philosophers. My profession is political theory . . . I have said goodbye to philosophy once and for all." Although this volume contains pieces on Augustine, on Kierkegaard, on Dilthey, and on existentialism, these are merely exegetical, they are not original contributions to philosophy. Arendt's frank self-description seems correct.

In the short papers on religion Hannah Arendt throws cold water at those who take a wishful-thinking attitude to the matter. She holds that whether or not religion resembles political ideology, or is morally useful and good for mankind, we cannot evade the question of truth: we need a straight answer to the straight question "Does God exist, or doesn't he?" Her own answer, like Hume's, is "We cannot know."

Some of the essays have been translated from the German but most were originally written in English. Here I have to confess to being a rather half-hearted fan. I sometimes find Arendt's writings difficult to understand, not so much because of their ideas but because of the prose style. Arendt's style, as other readers must have noticed, is stereotypically "Germanic," i.e., often long-winded and a bit solemn; and the humor, such as it is, is decidedly grim. But that is not the real problem either. The real problem is her weird way with English words. In her book on violence, for example, she defines the English word *power* in a manner that defies the intuitions of at least one native speaker of the language. Then she builds a whole theory on the foundation of this baffingly idiosyncratic definition. There is nothing wrong with linguistic analysis in philosophy, but linguistic analysis is worse than useless when it generates fairy tales about meanings. On the other hand, if we treat the word *power* simply as a short and convenient way of referring to some strange and mysterious entity first identified by Hannah Arendt, it is possible to obtain insights from *On Violence* (1969).

In the Gaus interview, Hannah Arendt tells us: "I still speak with a heavy accent and I often speak unidiomatically." Her lack of idiomatic sensibility is exemplified several times in this volume. Consider for instance the word *fabricate*. Arendt uses the word in place of *produce*, *create*, *manufacture*, thus she speaks of the fabrication of theories, of corpses, and of soap. In German a *Fabrikant* is a manufacturer but in English a fabricator is either one who concocts stories or a downright liar. Another example is her idea that *fundament* means *foundation*. I don't know what the former word might or might not mean in American English but in English English it refers to a part of the body which isn't mentioned in polite society.

Arendt's editor, Jerome Kohn, is also rather insensitive to idiom. In a footnote to Chapter 23 ("Dedication to Karl Jaspers, 1947"), he is quite entertaining—unintentionally of course. He writes: "Lieber Verehrtester (Dear Most Honored One) . . . sounds odd and stiff in English [but] it is quite natural in German: Sehr Verehrter Herr (Very Honorable Mister) was a common salutation." Ouch! "My dear, and respected, professor" (say) and "Honored Sir" would surely be better than Mr. Kohn's puppy-dog translations.

Arendt's only really well-written book in English is *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, and one surmises that the difference is due to the discipline imposed by the circumstances of its writing—it was originally commissioned as a series of articles for *The New Yorker*—and

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also, probably, to editorial interference (or help; call it what you will). At all events, the style there is swift and clear and usually—though not, alas, invariably—meticulous as to meanings. In other words, it is pretty much the kind of style that one expected to find in *The New Yorker* thirty years ago.

Let's now consider the famous phrase and subtitle *the banality of evil*, a phrase which, together with certain other aspects of the book, caused something of a rumpus when *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was first published. In a postscript (a reply to her critics), Arendt says that to label something banal "is still far from calling it commonplace." That might be so in Arendtese, but the Oxford English Dictionary's primary definition of *banal* is, guess what: *adj.* = *commonplace*. Still, we mustn't quibble, since it is not too difficult to work out what she wants to say. Essentially she wants to distinguish between the crimes of the Nazis and the men who carried them out. The crimes were indeed not common, they were unprecedented. Yet we can't say that they were unique, since it is possible they might recur. The criminals, on the other hand, were mostly ordinary, even commonplace. Adolf Eichmann, she claims, was not a monster, not a freak, not a madman; he was an uneducated and rather stupid creature, clownish, illogical, and boastful. Quite ordinary, in fact. In the end, and in spite of her disclaimer, she does implicitly, and correctly, equate banality with the commonplace, at least when speaking about the evil of men rather than the evil of their crimes. Thus the question of meaning remains cloudy, and one wishes she had never so much as heard of the English word *banality*. In the essays on Nazism in the volume under review, that word does not appear.

Arendt's philosophical training did not protect her from a tendency to create false dichotomies. She seems to think that if a man is a clown he cannot be a monster. She does not consider the possibility that a ludicrous person might be a monster as well as a clown. I am not sure I understand Arendt's words on normality and social mores, but if I do it seems that she is tempted to regard normal behavior as equivalent, roughly speaking, to the behavior of a majority. Because of that she ignores, perhaps even rejects, the thought that if abnormality became commonplace it would still be abnormality. This is a mistake: if we all had tuberculosis, tuberculosis would still be a disease. It might be that Arendt's account is influenced by anti-essentialist leanings. Anti-essentialism is a commonplace dogma of much twentieth-century European philosophy.

A human monster is not an animal with green fangs; it, or he, is nothing more or less than one who carries out monstrous deeds. On this simple and obvious understanding of the term it is clear that most of the Nazis, high and low, were monsters. However one defines or re-defines *banality*, it remains confusing to say that an individual who carries out monstrous crimes is banal. It would be equally confusing to claim that saintliness is banal. Even though one knows what is meant, it remains confusing. What is meant by banality here, of course, is: *that which is humanly possible*. And we know, of course, that monstrous crimes are humanly possible, just as superb courage is humanly possible, martyrdom is humanly possible, wonderful goodness is humanly possible. Knowing all this we also surely know that although monstrous evil can become common it should never be seen as normal. Very occasionally, in some times and some places, superb courage, and wonderful goodness, have been relatively common, yet it would be wrong to pretend that these human attributes are merely normal, that they are not *noteworthy*. To describe extreme evil and extreme good as normal is to carry anti-essentialism to a lunatic conclusion. Perhaps that is where it leads anyway.

Turning again to the 1964 interview, we should notice that Hannah Arendt has this to say about her aim in writing: "When I am working I am not interested in how my work might affect people . . . What is important for me is to understand. For me, writing

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is a matter of seeking this understanding."

The search for understanding is a noble enterprise. Nevertheless, it is destined, sometimes, to be frustrated. In the essays on Nazism, and in the book about Eichmann, Hannah Arendt tries over and over again to explain, to understand. In one essay she suggests that men were willing to carry out the devilish work of extermination because they feared unemployment. She also speaks of the social rootlessness of the "bourgeoisie" (a catch-word, that), and the supposedly typical "bourgeois" desire to protect one's wife and family. But not all the stone-faced young men described by Primo Levi had wives and children. Later she dwells on the "logic" of racism—as if, having once accepted its false premise, one was forced by *logic* to exterminate people. But plainly *logic* has nothing to do with it: you might as well say that anyone who thinks donkeys are inferior to horses is *logically* committed to killing donkeys. It is not clear, either, how the muddleheaded Adolf Eichmann can have been influenced by logic, even ersatz logic. Arendt herself then points out that racism cannot explain Nazism after all, since Hitler had plans to exterminate some groups of Germans.

Side by side, almost, with her attempts to explain, we find the thesis that when jurists and others try to understand unprecedented crimes, all categories of explanation fail, and indeed must fail. This is a sound point, a philosophical point too as it happens, which she backs up with empirical evidence. Thus she discusses those groups of intellectuals (the psychologists, the economists, the philosophers, etc.) who choose their own favored categories (psychology, economics, philosophical determinism, etc.) to "explain" the Nazi crimes. The failure of these efforts, she implies, is obvious.

In the end, it seems to me, Hannah Arendt's own attempts to understand must also fail. Indeed she herself writes (in Chapter 30, "Understanding and Politics") that "people say that one cannot fight totalitarianism without understanding it. Fortunately this is not true; if it were our case would be hopeless."

The reason is that sometimes no explanations are possible. The Holocaust was senseless, ethnic cleansing is senseless, mass murder is senseless, and the senseless cannot be explained. Psychological and other explanations of Nazi crimes are quite unsatisfactory, as Arendt (sometimes) says. Moreover, the reasons produced by the perpetrators themselves are as senseless as their actions. They resemble the post hoc "explanations" given by people trying to answer questions about the antics they performed when under hypnosis. It doesn't follow, though, that senseless actions cannot be thwarted, cannot be prevented. The connection between explanation and prevention is looser than think-tankers think. There are things that we can explain but not prevent (eclipses for instance), and human actions that are inexplicable but preventable. Anyway, to paraphrase Marx, the point about genocide is not to understand it but to stop it. Stopping it might require political will, a commodity sometimes in short supply (look at Haiti, look at Bosnia), but that's another story.

The Nazi criminals were not literally mesmerized. Even if they acted under hypnosis in some metaphorical and highly stretched sense of that word, it was still right to call them to account. Toward the end of her book about the trial of Adolf Eichmann, Arendt quotes one of the Israeli judges, who in turn was quoting Grotius: "Punishment is necessary 'to defend the honor or the authority of him who was hurt by the offense so that the failure to punish may not cause his degradation.'" Without a rational view of punishment, justice degenerates into a sham: it becomes the rule of the strong for the advantage of the strong.

Were Hannah Arendt's attempts to understand the crimes of Nazis a waste of effort? Of course not. Her books and essays are essential as history, and as commentaries on history. They also contain sharp psychological and sociological insights, including insights about the disciplines of psychology and sociology. And there are important les-

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sons about how far one can go in trying to understand what is ultimately senseless. From Hannah Arendt we learn that description alone can be valuable, and that perception and judgment are possible even when explanation as such cannot succeed.

Slip slidin' away

Kenneth A. Brown
Cycles of Rock and Water:
At the Pacific Edge.
HarperCollins, 309 pages, $23

reviewed by Patti Hagan

In the old days of college science reqs—before the 1960s—economics was still the dismal science, and geology the dull one. Then plate tectonics began shifting the lay of the land. Geology got sexy. *The New Yorker* got a geology beat.

John McPhee spent fifteen years on it, mostly in the company of the hot new geologists called plate tectonicists, scientists who had to invent so many geoneologisms that McPhee called them "geonovelists." McPhee himself stockpiled "palinspastic reconstructions," "pulsating glaciers," "discordant batholiths," and "incompetent rock." He wrote a tectonics tetralogy, saving "the far-out stuff . . . in the Far West," "a leather-jacket geology in mirrored shades," for last. Published a year ago, *Assembling California* is a seismic take on the "extensional disassembling of the earth" going on there.

Now into this same far-out country comes Kenneth Brown, in the company of "mobility-minded geologists" (too many interchangeable talking rock heads), also to address the "well-tuned machine" of plate tectonics on the North American continent's cutting—Pacific—edge. In P.T., "continents were suddenly mobile and shifty things. They jumped about and wandered across the face of the earth . . . [which] was not uniform and unchangeable but divided into plates of oceanic and continental crust." For two years, Mr. Brown scouted the six-thousand-mile route that the "mobile Pacific Plate" will travel over the next two hundred million years while "speeding toward Alaska at the rate of some two inches per year." Alaska is the destination of Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, San Diego, Santa Cruz, and all the other West Coast towns that happen to be aboard the Pacific Plate, headed for rendezvous and subduction in the Aleutian Trench, where the "moving Pacific Plate is being thrust back down into the earth."

Even so, and despite the *Sturm und Drang* of plate tectonics—the drama of large hunks of the earth's crust slipping, sliding, bumping and grinding into one another; repeated episodes of continental subduction and volcanoviolence, fire, and quake; hundreds of millions of years of catastrophic happenings—*Cycles* could only be called a swift read in geologic time. Under no circumstances, however, could it be called gripping. Imagine sitting in Alaska two hundred million years waiting for L.A. to get there.

Mr. Brown, who holds both geology and English degrees from Stanford, seems to do better by geological slip-faults than grammatical ones, but I am of the old-fashioned school that expects publishers to edit the books they sell. Given my belief in the publisher's right to first-edit, I confess I resent having had to line edit, copy edit, *and* fact check this book. Myself. Thinking about this from my safe "passive East Coast" niche on the North American Plate, I infer the complete absence of even a hypothetical editor—call her Gondwana Land—for this book. The editorial fault lines are quite clear, and they all point to HarperCollins, which house appears to have developed a plate-tectonic editing method: text is allowed to slip and slide through HarperCollins's computers without an editor ever laying a hand on it.

Mr. Brown has done his P.T. best, but he seems to be a better geologist than he is a writer—and therefore deserved the kind of editorial assistance that predates plate tectonics. (Says geologist David Howell of his geobrethren: "you have to have a strong left

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brain to visualize things, but writing is a right-brain thing. Well we're horrible at it.") An editor would have divined the right-*and*-left-brain need for an INDEX! And a GLOSSARY! (I had to make my own.)

I don't doubt for a gigasec that "all rocks have stories to tell" or even that "you can read them like a book." But not all rocks make good books. An editor could have saved this book from reading like a dull rock. The geoterm for a time gap in the geological record is "unconformity." The pubterm for a gap in the editorial record should be "editorial unconformity." In *Cycles* the editorial unconformities are ubiquitous. There are orthographic unconformities, factual unconformities, grammatical fracture zones, logical discontinuities, double faults, and dike swarms of typos.

Of course, a publisher-edited book would have deprived readers the fun of hunting down so many varieties of unconformity, e.g., *four* times "*sights*" does what "sites" should have, as in the Santa Cruz Mountains are "the most likely *sight* of the next major earthquake in northern California." (Such sites are usually hard to see.) Mr. Brown describes "two plates squeezing the rocks between them like a *vice*." (Plate-tectonic virtue goes unremarked.) At mention of redwoods possessive, we have "*there* trunks," while a hummingbird "just *stood their* hovering." (There, there. Not even Roger Tory Peterson has seen such a thing.)

Gondwana Land could have kept Mr. Brown from entering "a new world" or "a different world" at every change of venue. Or from recycling the same twist of phrase four and five times on most any page. And Gondwana Land would have caught fact gaps. On page 24, "early humans began to migrate across the Bering land bridge" *25,000* years ago. On page 187, they begin to cross the same bridge *17,000* years ago. (Was the editor AWOL? Out in the field?) Likewise, on page 143, the prominent Cascadia Subduction Zone is "nearly one thousand miles long," but twenty pages later it's been downsized to "seven hundred." Any editor capable of cracking a dictionary would have found that there is no "*Tlinglit*" Indian tribe —just Tlingit.

Evidence of plate-tectonic editing keeps raining down and sedimenting up. In the prologue, I corrected "terrane" for the first time. It seemed a pernicious typo, and for the next 249 pages I fixed it. Then, finally, Mr. Brown got around to defining "terrane" as "a deliberate misspelling of the word terrain" specially for geology. Even an assistant editor would have moved the definition up to first mention. But if there is no editor to uplift blocks of type and shift them around, indirection happens.

Gondwana Land could have cut the endless geo-glib lines, too. "If you want to learn about recent earthquakes, the soil is where it's at." "The rocks are are all there underneath your feet, waiting to be heard." "Motion is what West Coast geology is all about." Saving writers from their most precious selves is what *editing* used to be all about. And rescuing them from grammatical fracture zones such as this: "Upwelling is essentially sucking like a straw. But the length of that straw is not very deep." Or this: "The forces that have lifted them out of the sea are still taking place." (Impossible grammatically and geologically.)

Review-driven, I pushed through to the end of this serious-fauxpoetic-geologic book —bored to a fault. Publishers beware the soft "Category: Nature"! This nature book is full of slip-faced sand dunes, deflation plains, subduction zones, reverse faults, slickensides, and bad poetry. ("The scalloped edges of waves glistened like pearls in the moonlight.")

Geologist Howell talks about the problem people have "relating to the consequences of very slow motions for a very long time. . . . It's really hard to understand how long one hundred million years is. You just have to play with these slow rates over and over again in your head until you finally realize that two thousand kilometers of movement is nothing." I don't wish to sound volcanoclastic, but Howell has clarified my problem with the 309-page movement of this book.

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Doleful laureate

Peter Levi Tennyson.
Scribner's, 370 pages, $30

Michael Thorn Tennyson.
A Thomas Dunne Book/
St. Martin's Press, 566 pages, $30

reviewed by Michael Glover

It seems to be difficult for the contemporary biographer to strike the right balance between hagiography and willful disparagement. In our day, biographies are dashed off with malice aforethought (the straightforward malice of the Albert Goldman kind or the more devious, hand-wringing, pietistical species of dirt-digging of an Andrew Motion); and it has, by corollary, become something of a national pastime on the part of the dull-witted and gullible reader to affect horror and indignation when human beings are discovered to be no more than poor, tasteless confections of muddleheadedness and self-delusion. More's the wonder then that they manage to achieve as much as they do.

The poet Alfred Lord Tennyson's first biographer, his son Hallam, erred generously on the side of hagiography, as anyone who has had the stamina to read the thousand-odd pages of treacly and unctuous prose/praise that constitute *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by His Son* (1897) will surely agree. Here is Hallam's version of that great Victorian death-bed scene:

> The tendency to fatal syncope may be said to have really commenced about 10 A.M. on Wednesday, and on Thursday, 6 October [1892], at 1:35 A.M., the great poet breathed his last. Nothing could have been more striking than the scene during the last few hours. On the bed a figure of breathing marble, flooded and bathed in the light of the full moon streaming through the oriel window; his hand clasping the Shakespeare which he asked for but recently, and which he had kept by him to the end; the moonlight, the majestic figure as he lay there, "drawing thicker breath," irresistibly brought to our minds his own "Passing of Arthur."

There is heroism and myth-making aplenty in this account of the death, at age eighty-two, of the great national hero. Two recent biographies of Tennyson, one written by the British poet and critic Peter Levi and the other by the novelist and literary journalist Michael Thorn, have no truck with hagiography. Mr. Levi makes a serious attempt to see both the life and the poetry in the wider context of Tennyson's intellectual preoccupations as an eminent Victorian. His book, though it tells us little new about the poet's life, is something of a model for modern critical biography: it is sympathetic toward Tennyson, informed about his times, and penetrating about his works. Mr. Thorn, on the other hand, while never playing fast and loose with the details of Tennyson's life, takes a certain relish in reminding us that *his* examination strips away all the persiflage of the past and asks the kind of questions that his more inhibited predecessors were presumably too coy to tackle. His book is a serious examination up to a point, and then it becomes the model for another sort of very modern book—the tell-all celebrity bio that presents us not so much with a life as with a pathology.

Tennyson was one of twelve children, and the material circumstances of his early life were far from comfortable. His father, though moderately well endowed with a rector's living, which included a small rectory in rural Lincolnshire, was a choleric, embittered man, and most of his children suffered from one kind of disabling condition or another—melancholia, insanity, opium addiction, alcoholism . . . Small wonder then that the young Alfred grew up shy, reclusive, bookish, and inclined to frequent attacks of melancholia himself ("there was little about melancholia that he didn't know," wrote W. H. Auden).

Life at Trinity College, Cambridge, must have come as something of a relief to him

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when he went up at the age of eighteen in 1827. He was able to indulge his literary interests with such friends as Edward FitzGerald and William Makepeace Thackeray; and the college to which he belonged could boast of such eminent former members as Wordsworth and Byron. It was a poet's milieu *par excellence*. By this time he had already begun to draft some of the poems that would eventually be collected in *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830); but, as ever with Tennyson, he was extremely reluctant to release his work for critical appraisal. The cold breath of criticism of any kind was always accepted with very bad grace.

That first collection included at least one remarkable poem, "Mariana"; but its overall mood seemed an accurate reflection of the spiritual countenance of an extremely doleful young man, and one, moreover, who lived in daily terror of being struck down by the family's twin afflictions—epilepsy and madness. Tennyson entered into the most intense friendship of his life while up at Cambridge—with the seventeen-year-old Arthur Henry Hallam, son of a leading Whig historian. The friendship came to a tragically abrupt close when Hallam died of a cerebral hemorrhage at the age of twenty-two. He died, said Tennyson, "as near perfect as mortal man can be," and he was mourned by the poet until his own death more than half a century later.

On one occasion in the 1930s, T. S. Eliot, then the publishing director and *éminence grise* of Faber & Faber, asked the young Stephen Spender what he intended to do with his life. Spender replied that he intended "to be a poet." "*Be* a poet?" said Eliot, blanching. Eliot would have found the young Tennyson equally embarrassing, for it was evident from the start that it was Tennyson's ambition in life not merely to write poetry from time to time while engaging in other activities too, but to *be* a poet in essence. This ambition determined his particular way of dressing—it was after he had made a trip to Spain with Hallam in July 1830 that Tennyson adopted the Spanish cloak and sombrero-style hat in which he stares out at us from the photograph on the jacket of Michael Thorn's biography, and which he was to favor for the rest of his life. All forms of writing other than poetry were uncongenial to him. He wrote very few letters, and these were short and to the point. He refused to contribute a preface to the posthumously published *Poems* of his dear departed friend Hallam; he wrote no introductions and no essays; he kept no diary.

In spite of the fact that his second book, the *Poems* of 1842, had established his claim to be the outstanding poet of his generation—it contained the great dramatic monologue "Ulysses" and many revised (and greatly strengthened) versions of poems from the earlier collection—Tennyson's personal life remained rootless and aimless throughout the decade. Financial crises sapped his strength, and the critics had begun to carp at him for his failure to abandon the element of brooding melancholy that seemed to pervade his work. After all, was this not the Hungry Forties, the age of Chartism and, in the words of Thomas Carlyle, the "Condition-of-England question"? It was Carlyle who, in 1840, had captured the Tennysonian demeanor to perfection: "A fine, large-featured, dim-eyed, bronze-colored, shaggy-headed man . . . who swims, outwardly and inwardly, with great composure in an inarticulate element of tranquil chaos and tobacco smoke; great now and then when he does emerge."

Throughout the first half of the Forties, Tennyson suffered a prolonged nervous collapse. "I have not enjoyed a good day, a perfect white day, for years," he wrote his old friend Edward FitzGerald in July 1842. For all of this dark decade, it seemed that poetry might not be sufficient to sustain him, either spiritually or materially. Then came that *annus mirabilis* of 1850, when, upon the death of Wordsworth, he was offered the post of Poet Laureate.

Generally speaking, to appoint a man (there have—alas—been no women) Poet Laureate is to put a curse upon his creative

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endeavors—unless, that is, he is not a mediocrity already, which the majority have been. The post was first established by Charles II in 1668 to provide John Dryden, that excellent public poet, great translator of Ovid, and interesting Restoration playwright, with relatively easy access to money from the public purse. In the twentieth century, the roll call of poets and poetasters who have held the position has been dull indeed: among others, Bridges, Masefield, and that stirring amateur of bicycles, tea shops, and harmoniums, Sir John Betjeman. The present incumbent, Ted Hughes (a genuine poet for a change), blames Tennyson for the stench that seems to emanate from the Laureate's chair.

The offer of the Laureateship to Tennyson on November 5, 1850, had been heralded by a strange dream of the night before (in hindsight, Tennyson would not have found this at all surprising; he was a great believer in psychical research and all such mumbo jumbo). According to a letter, he dreamed "that the Queen and the Prince had called on him at his Mother's and been very gracious, the Prince kissing him, which made him think 'very kind but very German.'" The dream positively cries out for a Freudian interpretation—which will not, of course, be forthcoming.

The fact of the matter was that Tennyson had not been entirely happy when the letter arrived from the Keeper of Her Majesty's Privy Purse. Did this mean that he would have to write poems to order? Jump through the hoop for a band of rogues and libertines? He accepted—after first stipulating that "no birthday ode should be required."

The year 1850 had brought Tennyson two other remarkable successes: first, the publication of *In Memoriam*, a poetic sequence written in memory of Arthur Hallam, which was to become the most celebrated poem of the Victorian age, and, second, an extremely secretive marriage to Emily Sellwood. Although it is true that Emily suffered from a lifelong spinal disorder, she was certainly not the fey invalid that she has often been depicted as being. She remained a resolute, hard-working secretary to Tennyson until 1874, when she collapsed from overwork. (As the years went by and Tennyson's fame grew, so did the correspondence. By 1885, he was obliged to announce in the London *Times* that he was "wholly unable to answer the innumerable letters which he daily receives, nor can he undertake to return or criticise the manuscripts sent to him.")

In 1852, the death of yet another eminent Victorian was turned to Tennyson's material advantage. The passing of the Duke of Wellington, hero of Trafalgar, prompted a frenzied outpouring of patriotic grief. Dickens wrote that the public "seemed to have gone mad about the funeral." Tennyson's "Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington," written in great haste, and published in pamphlet form two days before the great funeral procession that was said to have been witnessed by one and a half million people, was sold in great quantities on the streets of London. Two years later, misfortune proved fortunate once again: the disastrous Charge of the Light Brigade in the Crimea was memorialized by Tennyson "in a few minutes"—as the quality of the poem itself, first published in the *Times*, might suggest. These drum-beating, orotund, jingoistic efforts are among the poems by which Tennyson's reputation dwindled. Was he proud of them? Of "The Charge of the Light Brigade" he said: "It is not a poem on which I pique myself."

The brooding *Maud*, published in 1855, was a return to an earlier Tennyson, and it was universally condemned. Gladstone called it "unintelligible"; other critics trod less warily. They called it disconcerting—if not downright disgusting. And yet to the twentieth-century reader, the poem seems to strike a modern note. Here is Tennyson, for example, with mediumistic skill and unnerving prescience, writing in the manner of T. S. Eliot:

> And I loathe the squares and streets,
> And the faces that one meets . . .
> And my heart is a handful of dust.

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Maud was Tennyson's most favored offspring. He thought of her rather as Dickens thought of dear David Copperfield—fondly, with a degree of paternal indulgence. He was in the habit of cornering people and reciting the poem to them *in toto*—which, given its great length, must have been a rather wearying experience.

By the 1860s, Tennyson was greatly in demand for public readings. Unlike Dickens, he habitually refused—he loathed reading in public. In 1862, he was offered the handsome sum of £20,000 to undertake a reading tour of America. He turned it down. It is the sum of money on offer that sticks in the mind here—such riches for a mere poet!

According to those who knew him, Tennyson's reading style was highly distinctive. He read with strong rhythmical emphasis, not so much a reading as a chant, intoned on a single note. FitzGerald had this to say of Tennyson's reading of one of his finest dramatic monologues, "St Simeon Stylites": "This is one of the poems A. T. would read with grotesque Grimness, especially at such passages as 'Coughs, Aches, Stitches, etc.,' laughing aloud at times." Edmund Gosse's observations were less genial: "He hangs sleepily over the syllables, in a rough, monotonous murmur, sacrificing everything to quantity. Had I not known the poem well beforehand it would have been entirely unintelligible."

Four months after the death of the Prince Consort in 1861, Tennyson had the first of many audiences with Queen Victoria. She informed him that, after the Bible, *In Memoriam* was her greatest source of comfort. They became fast friends. And so it continued: greater fame; greater wealth; the inevitable peerage. The publication of *Idylls of the King* (the lusty Arthurian epic on which Tennyson toiled on and off for half a century, and which Gerard Manley Hopkins was to dismiss as so many "Charades from the Middle Ages") amassed him £4,500 in royalties during its first year in print. Magazines would now pay him as much as £300 for the use of a single poem—when "Tithonus" appeared in the second issue of Thackeray's *Cornhill*, the issue sold seventy-five thousand copies.

On the occasion of the funeral at Westminster Abbey, Alfred Austin, the poetaster who succeeded Tennyson as Poet Laureate, read a windy poem in his memory entitled "The Passing of Merlin." Thomas Hardy thought the whole thing a bit overdone and "less penetrating than a plain country interment would have been." And the twentieth century exacted its revenge for Tennyson's hubris. Auden called him the stupidest of all English poets. Critics from the school of close reading couldn't find anything worth nitpicking over—it was all verbal lusciousness; maudlin murmurings in immemorial elms; the very epitome of laureate fustian.

There is, however, more, much more, to him than that. The short lyrics and the great dramatic monologues aside, there is the extent of his dedication to the craft of poetry, for example, which cannot be denied despite the fact that much of the verse may have been bad or merely occasional. His coeval Browning put it well: "Nobody has more fully found out at the beginning what he was born to do—nor done it more effectively," he wrote. His nature may have been too much that of the moralist and the preacher for a century that has been so wholly wedded in its poetry to the notion of the thing-in-itself uncluttered by discursive embroidery (or, to put it slightly differently, reasoned argument).

Peter Levi's *Tennyson* gets to the heart of all this. If Mr. Levi has done little more than synthesize and elegantly re-present the facts of Tennyson's life, his analysis of individual poems from the great corpus amounts to a carefully argued defense of one of the most valuable aspects of Tennyson's life and work—the fact that throughout his life he maintained a healthy interest in the arts and the sciences equally, and in the general progress of human knowledge. He was, as Mr. Levi demonstrates, one of the last great generalists during an age when to be a

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generalist seemed both desirable and still possible.

These greater interests were absorbed into his preoccupations as a poet, as they were into Browning's, too, of course. Michael Thorn's *Tennyson*, on the other hand, with its "insights" into the "rumors" of Tennyson's "drug addiction, epilepsy, sexual coldness, homosexuality," turns the poet into a more thoroughly modern man than we might ever have expected or imagined him to be. Would Tennyson himself have regarded this book as a mirror to his mind? Or would he have dashed it to the ground in fury at such impertinence?

Shorter notices

Abram Tertz (Andrei Sinyavsky)
Strolls with Pushkin.
Translated from the Russian by
Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy
& Slava I. Yastremski.
Yale University Press, 175 pages, $25

Aleksandr Pushkin (1799–1837) has passed through the vagaries of fashion and served succeeding generations of literary, political, and intellectual factions as a cultural icon in which they could find support and embellishment for their respective ideologies. Although the poet was wildly popular in his own lifetime, the Russian cult of Pushkin was not launched until the publication of his collected works in 1855, nearly two decades after his death in a duel at the hands of his wife's admirer. The cult then faded until 1880, when Dostoevsky re-ignited it with a fervent speech at the unveiling of the first statue of the poet. By the mid-twentieth century, Pushkin had become a sacred cow, an untouchable symbol of Russia's cultural heritage and sense of identity.

The extent of modern Russians' almost fanatical devotion to Pushkin in domestic and émigré cultural circles alike was revealed by the uproar that greeted Andrei Sinyavsky's roguish *Strolls with Pushkin*. Although published in France in 1975 under Sinyavsky's pen name Abram Tertz, it was not widely known to the Russian cultural community until it was excerpted in a Moscow newspaper in 1989. When the reaction came, it was furious. Sinyavsky's occasionally preposterous claims about Pushkin, and his use of prison-camp jargon, overstatement, and ironic asides, earned him accusations of aesthetic nihilism even from Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.

"Abram Tertz" first appeared in the West in 1956 as the author of "On Socialist Realism," an ironic dismantling of the official Soviet literary genre. His call for "fantastic realism," a genre that would acknowledge and accommodate the absurdity of everyday life, was used as the primary evidence of his anti-Soviet agitation during his 1966 show trial and earned him a seven-year sentence to hard labor. "Right now I put my hope in phantasmagoric art, with hypotheses instead of a Purpose, an art in which the grotesque will replace realistic descriptions of ordinary life," he wrote. In the Dubrovlag camp, Sinyavsky created a critical counterpart to "fantastic realism," smuggling passages of *Strolls with Pushkin* past the prison censors in letters to his wife.

A profound admiration for Pushkin underlies Sinyavsky's irreverence and, at times, consciously frivolous accusations. Yet even a few of the more discerning critics were unable to get beyond such statements as "Pushkin ran into great poetry on thin erotic legs and created a commotion." Their insistence on the fact that Pushkin was known to have been an athletic man shows, as Sinyavsky's wife, Marya Rozanova, has pointed out, the extent to which "the Russian people have unlearned how to read," and are now only able to understand the written word literally.

Sinyavsky interweaves the poet's biography and his work, not in search of murky psychological mechanisms or complexes but in order to illuminate both Pushkin's *oeuvre* and the persona he created in and around his work. Sinyavsky even goes so far as to speculate on the rumors surrounding Pushkin's wife and the Baron D'Anthès that led to

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the fatal duel, not merely for the sake of titillation but also because he sees in the duel between Lenski and Onegin a parodic prefiguration of Pushkin's own demise. "Can it be—I'm asking directly because life is short and the gauntlet has been thrown down and evasions won't help anymore—can it be that Pushkin, who knew his own worth, didn't know that for centuries and centuries all humanity, hearing of him, whether indifferent toward him or filled with admiration, whether readers or illiterates, would ask: But after all, cross your heart, tell the truth, did she put out or didn't she?"

Although presented as an aimless stroll through Pushkin's life and work, Sinyavsky's study has a deceptive integrity of focus. The author circles around certain themes—eroticism, pure art, the artist's persona in his life and in his work, the politics of literary fame, and the replacement of religion with art—and plays variations on them. With all the humor of Witold Gombrowicz's diaries but without their bitterness, *Strolls with Pushkin* deflates the pomposities uttered in the name of this national hero and brings to light aspects of a great writer that have long been buried beneath stiff academic studies and official cultural decrees.

—*Tess Lewis*

Douglas Coupland Life After God. Pocket Books, 360 pages, $17

Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture (1991) established Douglas Coupland as the leading bard of the young and the listless. It was a best seller, read by any twentysomething who is, or hopes to be, culturally in-the-loop. Coupland's new collection of short stories and sketches, *Life After God*, examines the spiritual life of the X-ers, or rather, their lack of spiritual life.

Twentysomethings bristle at the very notion of generational identity. They protest (too much) when they are stereotyped as "cynical," "jaded," or "slack." As strident individualists, one and all, they reply that the "Generation X" phenomenon is a sham. It's merely a fortysomething marketing strategy, a useless label that fails to describe the diversity and richness of opinion among young people.

But is there a common denominator linking the experience of those impossible-to-pigeonhole twentysomethings? Coupland's answer can be found inside the dust jacket of *Life After God*. He addresses his peers in neon-yellow letters: "YOU ARE THE FIRST GENERATION RAISED WITHOUT RELIGION." This pronouncement appears again as a headnote to a story about a young man walking through a desert. Perhaps Coupland repeats this phrase to alert some of his readers to the image of the spiritual desert, a metaphor that was overbearing enough before being underlined by the author.

How did the X-ers end up on this lonely march through the spiritual desert of young adulthood? Baby Boom parents, generally relieved to have thrown the old-time religion off their own backs, were hardly going to turn around and impose it on their children. They taught their kids, the X-ers, to be moral without any suprarational props like God, heaven, or hell. Biblical tales that taught common-sense moral lessons (Be compassionate, Don't hurt anyone, Be honest) were dusted off now and then, but not as revelation. That's for fanatics. *Life After God* should be read by anyone interested in the latest results of this experiment.

The children became neither vigorous, self-legislating young adults, as their parents hoped, or vicious, hedonistic animals, as the moralists feared. Instead, they became bland, boring, dispirited. Coupland, despite his occasional lack of subtlety, correctly identifies the cause of this enervation. Unlike the young literary protagonists of the past, who suffered from the press of impossible, desperate longings, the various X-ers in Coupland's stories feel the anguish that results from their inability to sustain any longing whatsoever. They yearn to believe in God and in the possibility of love, in anything, but they find themselves unable to do so.

In the best story of the collection, the nar-

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rator describes how he and his group of suburban high-school friends have turned out. Especially poignant is his description of a conversation with Stacey, once upon a time the "hip-chick" and now a paralegal assistant who drinks too much. Over cranberry martinis she becomes "confessional," ruminating about her loneliness. She drinks more, becoming more insistent. When Coupland italicizes a word or two in her drunken soliloquy, the desperation is palpable. To her intoxicated musings, the narrator can only reply, "I'm hearing you, Stace." He wants to change the subject away from her occasional "lucky nights," and most of all he wants to get away from her.

Coupland cannot resist announcing the moral of the story. He concludes the episode with the words "Somewhere, years ago, so many of us broke the link between love and sex. Once broken, it can never be fixed again." This easy despair is frustrating. He is in a position to do a Nixon-goes-to-China on the subject of the way young people love, but he will not make the trip. When conservative cultural critics suggest that sex has been reduced to the thing-in-itself, they are dismissed as scolds. Coupland's hipster credentials, however, are impeccable. Were he to break ranks, he might be able to offer his peers an alternative to the grim business of their "relationships."

Sadly, as astute as Coupland is in observing the world around him—the thin friendships, the loveless marriages, the broken families, the broken people—that world appears to be the only one he can imagine. He falls victim to the great twentysomething conceit: he looks around and sees that no one loves, that no one believes in God, and therefore he concludes that love and God do not exist. He never questions whether he is equipped to draw the right conclusions from his observations.

In other words, Coupland has the eye and the ear of a good reporter, but lacks the vision of a good novelist. He sees the telling detail and hears the revealing bit of dialogue, but he never goes behind or beyond them. The result, *Life After God*, is rather thin gruel. But as such, it is an excellent guide to the thin spiritual life of the first generation raised without religion.

—Jeffrey Bloom

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